

LESSONS OF THE

Wicked

DR. PERRY J. HUBBARD

Lessons of the Wicked – Copyright 2021

Dr. Perry J Hubbard

Contents

Introduction	6
Background and texts for the wicked.....	7
Cain – Jealousy	15
Babel - Pride	20
Wife of Potiphar – Trap.....	25
Pharaoh – Ruler of all Egypt – Egotism	30
Dathan, Abiram, and Korah – Power	35
Ten Spies – Civil Disobedience.....	39
Balaam – fame.....	44
Achan – greed.....	49
Abimelech – Vanity	54
Delilah – Betrayal.....	58
Micah – Lawless.....	64
Goliath – Contempt.....	70
Nabal – Surly.....	74
Witch of Endor – Sorcery	79
Shimei – Disloyalty.....	84
Sheba – Rebellion	89
Jeroboam – Syncretism	93
Jezebel – Malevolent	98
Gehazi – Lying.....	102
Athaliah – Murder.....	107
Manasseh – Rejection	112
Pashhur – False.....	117

Sanballat – Intimidation	123
Haman – Hate	130
Cripple by pool – Self-preservation	136
Herods 1 2 3 4 - Fear	141
Ananias and Sapphira – Status	147
Bar-Jesus – Deceit	152
Demetrius – Inflammatory	158
Diotrephes – Arrogance	166
Study Guide for the Wicked	170
Lesson 1 Cain – Jealous → Generous	170
Lesson 2 Babel – Proud → Humble	171
Lesson 3 Wife of Potiphar – Trap or Enslave, Seduce → Liberate, Free.....	172
Lesson 4 Pharaoh – Egotism → Humility	173
Lesson 5 Dathan and Korah – Power → Approval	173
Lesson 6 Balaam – Fame → Duty	174
Lesson 10 Ten Spies – Civil Disobedience → Submission	175
Lesson 8 Achan – Greed → Content	175
Lesson 9 Abimelech – Vain → Meek	176
Lesson 10 Delilah – Betrayal → Trust.....	177
Lesson 11 Micah – Lawless → Righteous	178
Lesson 12 Goliath – Contempt → Respect	178
Lesson 13 Nabal – Surly → Courteous, Civil	179
Lesson 14 Witch – Exploit → Encourage	180
Lesson 15 Shimei – Disloyalty → Devotion, Delight.....	180
Lesson 16 Sheba – Rebellion → Conform.....	181

Lesson 17 Jeroboam – Syncretism → Faithful	182
Lesson 18 Jezebel – Malevolent → Compassion	182
Lesson 19 Gehazi – Lying → Honest.....	183
Lesson 20 Athaliah – Murder → Mercy.....	184
Lesson 21 Manasseh – Rejection → Approval, Acknowledge	185
Lesson 22 Pashhur – False → Sound, Solid.....	185
Lesson 23 Sanballat – Intimidation → Persuasion	186
Lesson 24 Haman – Hatred → Love	187
Lesson 25 Lame Man – Self-preservation → Sacrifice	188
Lesson 26 Herods – Fear → Courage	189
Lesson 27 Bar Jesus – Pervert, Distort, Deceive → Explain, Clarify	189
Lesson 28 Ananias and Saphira– Status → Servant	190
Lesson 29 Demetrius – Inflammatory → Calm	191
Lesson 30 Diotrephes – Arrogant → Lowly	192

Introduction

As one reads through the Bible, they will encounter the wicked. People who chose to oppose God and his plan. People who represent what happens when sin dominates their lives. This book is a collection of fictional stories based on the biblical information given in the bible. Each is followed by a bible study that looks at a positive characteristic that would represent the opposite of the negative behavior portrayed by the person in each story. Truthfully, we can learn a lot about how-to live-in God's kingdom as we observe what happens to those who choose not to do so and learn about the positive qualities God and his word encourage as to develop in our lives.

Background and texts for the wicked

Cain – He was the first-born son of Adam and Eve. When God was not satisfied with his offering, he became angry and killed his brother Abel, whose offering pleased God. Cain's punishment was to struggle to work the soil, which would no longer produce for him.

Main Text – Genesis 4:1-17

Babel – This is the name given to the location where the inhabitants united to build a tower to reach to heaven. Their goal was to make a name for themselves and to avoid being scattered over the face of the whole world. It was there that God confused the language of man. The name is based on this action by God.

Main text – Genesis 11:1-9

Wife of Potiphar – The is the story of the wife of Joseph's master and how she tried to seduce Joseph. In the end, when he refused, she trapped him, lied to her husband, and got Joseph thrown into prison.

Main text – Genesis 39:1-20

Pharaoh – This is the name given to the leader who was in power at the time of the release of the people of Israel from slavery. He opposed the instructions given by Moses to let them go, allowed all the plagues to occur, and finally caused the destruction of his army in an attempt to oppose God.

Main texts – Exodus 5-14

Dathan/Korah/Abiram – These three men led a group of people in opposition to the leadership of Moses after the people of Israel failed to obey God and enter the land. As a result, they were swallowed up by the ground, in confirmation of Moses as the leader chosen by God.

Main text – Numbers 16; Numbers 26:10-11

Balaam – He was a well-known sorcerer called on by Balak, king of the Moabites, to curse the people of Israel. God told Balaam not to go at first and then let him go when Balak sent a second delegation to obtain Balaam's service. God told him he could go, if he agreed to speak only the words God would give him. God then used an angel and Balaam's donkey to reinforce this instruction.

Balaam obeyed God and pronounced blessings on Israel. Later, though, he provided the means for Moab to cause Israel to fall into sin and lose God's protection. Balaam was later put to death during a battle, for his involvement in divination and helping to cause the Israelites to sin.

Main texts – Numbers 22-25; Deuteronomy 23:4-5, Joshua 13:22; Revelation 2:24.

10 Spies – These were the men chosen to enter the land and bring back a report to Moses, as the Israelites prepared to enter the land of Canaan. These spies opposed the decision to enter because of the strength and size of the enemy, even though the land was fruitful. As a result of their insubordination, the Israelites were to wander for 40 years in the wilderness. The 10 spies were struck down and died of a plague for their bad report.

Main text – Numbers 13-14

Achan – He disobeyed the directions of Joshua to not take anything from the city of Jericho. When the Israelites lost their next battle, Joshua was told by God about the sin. Using lots, they discovered Achan's sin and uncovered what was stolen. It was hidden in the ground under his tent. As a result, he and his family were stoned to death.

Main Text – Joshua 7; Joshua 22:20

Abimelech – He was the son of a concubine of Gideon. He aspired to rule in his father's place and killed all of his seventy brothers, except one, Jotham. Jotham told a parable warning the people about what would happen because of what they had done. Those who

followed Abimelech eventually acted treacherously against him. That began a series of events that resulted in Abimelech's death, in fulfillment of the parable told by Jotham.

Main text – Judges 8:31; Joshua 9; 2 Samuel 11:21

Delilah – She was most likely a prostitute with whom Samson was enamored. She accepted a bribe from the Philistines to discover the source of Samson's strength. She discovered the secret and handed Samson over to the Philistines.

Main text – Judges 16:1-22

Micah – He was an Ephraimite who lived during the time of the judges. He stole money from his mother, which he later returned. She used that money to make an idol and create a shrine. Micah then hired a Levite as a personal priest, who left them when a better offer came along. In the end, he lost everything to a band of soldiers who took the Levite, the idol, and all the contents of the shrine with them.

Main text – Judges 17-18

Goliath – He was a giant who was a member of the Philistine army. He and his leaders challenged Saul to a battle: the best warrior of Israel against Goliath...a winner-takes-all battle. Saul refused to accept the challenge until David came and successfully defeated Goliath with a sling.

Main text – 1 Samuel 17

Nabal – He was a surly, mean man who mistreated anyone he dealt with, including his workers. Nabal abused the men of David and refused to give them anything in thanks for the security they had provided his workers and flocks. When his wife Abigail heard of this, she quickly prepared a gift for David in hopes of dissuading David from avenging his men by killing Nabal and probably anyone related to him. She was successful, and David accepted the gift. When Nabal learned what might have happened because of his insolence, he collapsed and died 10 days later.

Main text – 1 Samuel 25:1-38

Witch of Endor – When Saul was about to face his last battle with the Philistines, he decided to consult a witch. His men found one for him, and he asked her to contact a person in the spirit world. She reluctantly agreed, but only after they promised to protect her from the decree of death for anyone involved in sorcery. She called out and was stunned when Samuel appeared. Saul kept his promise and she was allowed to live.

Main text: 2 Samuel 28:1-24

Shimei – He was a Benjamite, from the same tribe as the former king, Saul. He had never been happy with David as king and considered him a usurper to the throne. When David was forced out of Jerusalem by his son Absalom, Shimei took this opportunity to revile and curse David as he fled. David later pardoned him. When Solomon became king, David advised him to be wary of Shimei. Solomon allowed him to live, but with conditions which Shimei later failed to keep, and he was then executed.

Main text: 1 Samuel 16:4-14; 19:16-23; 1 Kings 2:8, 36-46

Sheba – He was a Benjamite who tried to lead a rebellion against David. He used confusion about David's return to Jerusalem after Absalom's defeat to rally the 10 tribes against David. For a short time, he was successful but was finally trapped by Joab in a tower. A wise woman in the tower asked why they were being attacked and advised the town to kill Sheba in order to escape being destroyed themselves

Main text: 2 Samuel 20:1-22

Jeroboam – Jeroboam was an official during Solomon's reign, who oversaw all the forced labor of the house of Joseph. He rebelled against Rehoboam, Solomon's heir, and successfully led a revolt against Rehoboam, which split the kingdom. Ten of the tribes followed Jeroboam. The other two remained faithful to Rehoboam. In an attempt to solidify his control, Jeroboam established a false

worship with images of bulls and selected priests from outside the tribe of Levi. God judged him for this, and his family was later destroyed.

Main text: 1 Kings 11:26-14:30; 2 Chronicles 9:29; 10:1-15

Jezebel – She was the wife of King Ahab of Israel. She introduced the worship of Baal to the Israelites, threatened to kill Elijah, and was responsible for the deaths of many of the prophets of God. She arranged for the death of Naboth, so Ahab could take possession of Naboth's vineyard. She was killed as a result of an insurrection led by Jehu, as was prophesied by Elijah and in the manner prophesied by Elisha.

Main text: 1 Kings 16:31; 18:4; 19:1-2; 21:1-26; 2 Kings 9:1-37

Gehazi – He was the servant of Elisha and was witness to several miracles performed by Elisha. He decided to lie to Naaman in order to receive some of the payment Naaman offered to Elisha in return for healing him of leprosy. Gehazi's lie was discovered, and he was punished by becoming ill with the same disease from which Naaman had been cured, leprosy. He somehow managed to become part of the king's court and was present when the Shunamite woman returned to plead for the return of her land, which had been taken by another person.

Main text: 2 Kings 4-5; 8:4-6

Athaliah – Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. She was given in marriage to Jehoram, son of king Jehoshaphat, in an attempt to form an alliance between Israel and Judah. When her son Ahaziah was killed in battle she used this situation to kill all heirs to the throne and proclaim herself queen. She introduced the worship of Baal to Judah and used part of the temple for this worship. One grandson escaped, rescued by his aunt, who was the wife of the high priest Jehoida. Jehoida later installed Joash as king and used that event to have Athaliah killed.

Main text: 2 Kings 11:1-3, 13-20; 2 Chronicles 22; 23:1-21; 24:7

Manasseh – He was the son of Hezekiah. He rejected his father's faith in God and introduced many foreign religions into Judah. He caused the death of many as a result of an attempt to remove all who worshipped God. He was taken into captivity by the Assyrians, repented while in prison, and was allowed to return to Jerusalem as a vassal king. He did attempt to correct the great damage he had created.

Main text: 2 Kings 21; 2 Chronicles 33:1-20

Pashhur – He was a priest and chief governor in the house of the Lord in the time of Jeremiah. He persecuted Jeremiah and placed Jeremiah in stocks to humiliate him. Jeremiah pronounced divine judgment on him. This included future captivity and death in exile.

Main Text: Jeremiah 20:1-6

Sanballat – He was a governor of an area in the trans-Jordan under the Persians. He opposed Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. All his attempts to undermine Nehemiah's work failed.

Main text: Nehemiah 2:10-20, 4:1-15, 6:1-18, 13:4-28

Haman – He was an official in the Persian court. He became incensed by the actions of Mordecai and plotted the complete destruction of all Jews in the empire. In the end, he was executed on his own gallows.

Main text: read Esther

Lame man at pool – He was a man born lame. He had been placed by the pool of Bethesda in hopes that he might be the first to enter the pool at the right moment to be healed. The tradition being that when an angel stirred the water, the first one to enter would be healed. Jesus healed him on the Sabbath, and, in fear and self-preservation, he reported Jesus to the priests.

Main text: John 5:1-15

Ananias and Saphira – This couple schemed to sell a piece of property and then claim to give all the proceeds to the church. While in fact, they gave only a portion of the sale of the property. They both died as punishment for trying to deceive the Spirit of God.

Main text: Acts 5:1-11

Herods – There were four men who had the name Herod: Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa 1, and Herod Agrippa 2. All of them were vile, dangerous men, and each were present at key events in the history of Jesus and the Early Church. Herod the Great tried to kill the baby Jesus. Herod Antipas was responsible for the death of John the Baptist. Herod Agrippa 1 was responsible for releasing Jesus back to Pilate and later for the death of James. Herod Agrippa 2 was present at the trial of Paul in Caesarea and did nothing to free Paul. He was the ruler of the region when the Romans completely destroyed Jerusalem, the temple, and the entire country.

Main texts

Herod the Great: Matthew 2:1-22

Herod Antipas: Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 3:19-20, 9:7-9; 23:7-15;

Herod Agrippa 1: Acts 12:1-23

Herod Agrippa 2: Acts 26: 1-3, 24-32

Demetrius – He was a silversmith living in Ephesus during the ministry of Paul. When he saw a sharp decline in the sale of idols and images related to the worship of Artemis, he decided that he needed to get rid of Paul. He started a riot that failed.

Main text: Acts 19:24-41

Diotrephes – He was a leader in a church. He opposed John and sought to take control of the church for his own reasons. In order to gain control, he evicted those who opposed him.

Main text: 3 John 9-10

Cain – Jealousy

So many people have asked why I did it? And I always replied, “did what?”

I know what it is they want to know, but they are so judgmental.

Look, let me tell you a few things, and then maybe, or maybe not, I’ll consider answering the question.

My parents, God’s creation, the original man and woman, blew it. They had a great thing going. They lived in a garden, and they had everything they needed. They were loved by God and He...yes, the Creator of the whole universe, the Being they were to be in the image of...dropped by all the time to visit with them and to see how they were doing. Remember, their task was to care for the garden, something that didn’t take much effort.

Then he kicked them out for taking a bite out of one lousy fruit. They didn’t even get to finish eating it! It was over, and they knew it. It was only a bite, but the Creator’s response was definitely an overreaction. One little mistake, and He threw the book at them. Yeah, I know there were no books back then, but you get the idea. No second chance, no community service; they were guilty! No loopholes, no appeals, and definitely no chance to make it right.

So they were booted out of the garden. Literally with nothing. No clothes in those days. All they were given were animal skins to replace the leaf coverings, which really hadn’t covered much and definitely did not protect them from anything.

Though they were reluctant to talk to Abel and me about it, there were times when they shared what happened and how little mistakes are just as serious as big ones. Actually, both are based on the same attitudes and false thinking. I was going to learn a lot about this, and it would cause me a great deal of suffering.

At times, mom and dad would try to help us boys understand how important it is to obey God and to do the best we can to develop a relationship with Him. They would talk about their first years after

being forcefully ejected from the garden. They were hard. It took lots of effort and physical energy to determine which plants could be developed for food, and how to care for and store the results, so that there would be food to eat.

Abel and I were born during the time of God's judgment, that the ground would only produce food with effort and a lot of sweat. But father was astute and a good farmer. I saw the benefit of farming and chose to learn all I could from him, and soon I was caring for my own farm. Abel, on the other hand, had no interest in this, so he focused on raising sheep. This turned out to be a good thing. We were able to help each other out. He supplied us with meat, and I supplied him and his family with produce.

Then one day, Abel decided he was going to thank God for all he was enjoying. This upset me. I had a hard time seeing how sweating and living in a difficult world could be something to enjoy and be thankful for. The Garden of Eden was where I wanted to be.

Yes, my parents had messed up, we suffered because of their actions, and I was beginning to resent them. I didn't think I deserved to be included in their judgment and punishment.

Well, back to the story. Abel went ahead with his plan to thank God for all he was enjoying. He selected a perfect sheep. He then took the best parts and sacrificed them to God. How he did this is irrelevant, but the next thing I heard was that God actually talked with Abel and told him He was pleased with how he had shown his thanks.

Brothers, being brothers, I couldn't let this go without doing something myself. I wanted to show everyone that I was worthy of respect as well. That was the first mistake in a line of errors that would take me down a dangerous road of sin and disobedience.

So, I went to my storehouse, took some samples of my produce, and brought them to the same place where Abel had given his sacrifice. This was my second mistake, not the location, but the fact that I did not take time to consider that I should have brought the best, not

just samples. However, I would not realize this until later, until it was too late.

My sacrifice was inferior. God knew it and told me that it was not acceptable, but I was not interested in learning why. Instead, all I could think about was how I had taken the time to bring something. I had worked hard to produce what I had brought! And that made me infuriated with my brother. He had made me look bad. He had not worked as hard as I do. Why should his sacrifice be accepted and mine rejected?

All I could think about was that fruit in the Garden of Eden, and how a simple act had cost so much. To me, it made no sense. Even less sense now. I had brought a gift, but now I was being rejected for a small detail. I thought I had fulfilled what was expected of me. But that was my next step down the steep path to danger. And I was stumbling fast.

God saw this and tried to help me see what was happening. He tried to help me understand, that it was not ‘what’ I had brought, but rather the ‘why’ and ‘how’ it was brought. I was in no mood to be grateful; I was ... how should I say it... trying to manipulate God. So, I refused to hear His wise words.

It was not my fault. It was my parent’s fault. They were the reason I was forbidden to enter that garden. And now, Abel had set me up! He had done what was right, but all I could see was that what he had done, caused me to be rejected again, and that led to my being scolded by God. I say “scolded,” because that is what I chose to hear. Except, that is not what God was really saying. (How many times do children interpret the wise words of their parents as scolding?)

After my encounter with God, my mood became black and dangerous. I don’t remember if Abel came to talk to me, or if, in my anger, I sought him out to tell him what he had done was wrong, and how he was ruining my life. He tried to be understanding. He tried to help me understand what God was trying to tell me, but that

only made me angrier and angrier, until it drove me mad. The more I tried to explain myself and defend myself, the more patient he became. He should have stopped talking. He should have left, but no, he tried to calm me down and...well it was too much, and I lashed out in frustration and fury.

It only took one blow, and it killed him. I'm not sure how the rock ended up in my hand, and why there was blood on it. Then I saw Abel, and I knew. I knew why the bite of the fruit was so serious. But I would not admit that to anyone, not even to God. So, I buried him, went home, and made myself as inconspicuous as possible, so that no one would ask where I had been or what I was doing.

That plan worked with my family. It's not hard when your brother is a shepherd. They often disappear for days, taking the sheep to another place to feed them. Yes, it worked for the family but not God. One minute I was alone in my field, the next, there He was. And He asked the question I feared. Where is your brother? Of course, I tried to avoid the question. He was a shepherd; how should I know where he was? I am not responsible for him and what he does.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew. I knew why there were no second chances, no appeals. And God made it abundantly clear. I am, in fact, responsible. Good or bad, everything I do affects others. My sin impacts others. My good behavior guides others. I knew what He meant when He said sin was waiting for me, if I didn't listen (Gen. 4:7).

I knew that I had not just murdered my brother, I had murdered my relationship with God. My choice of an inferior sacrifice was the first step. The second, was the fact that I gave that sacrifice, not because of my relationship with God, but to satisfy a rule, an expectation. The third, was that I wanted to blame others for what had happened. The fourth step was my pride and insolence in refusing to hear God and see the truth. The last step, the murder, was actually a simple step. And, in comparison with the prior choices, it had the same result as taking a small bite from the fruit.

I deserved my punishment. It was severe, and it terrified me. His reaction opened the door to the possibility of being killed myself. God saw my fear, and maybe the possibility of my learning from all that had happened. So, he marked me, so that others might learn and avoid going down that same path of sin and pride.

The murder? Yes, I killed my brother. But I had killed something more important before that. I had killed my relationship with God. That was the more dangerous sin.

Don't do what I did. Don't ignore God. Don't take Him for granted. Don't think that He doesn't know what is in your heart. Do take time to be honest about what you are doing, and why. It may help you understand that it is the little bite that is serious.

Now, back to your question. No, I will not answer it. In fact, if you don't know the answer by now, then nothing I say will matter, and you will follow the same path that I took.

Babel - Pride

Hello, I am the mayor of Babel. That is not my real title, but it is close enough to explain my position among my people. I am a big supporter of public works, programs designed to benefit my people and to create a vision of affluence and power that will attract commerce and development.

We have some of the nicest parks and gardens in the region. One of them is a replica of the Garden of Eden. At least that is what we call it. We decided to create this to remind people of our special place in the world. The focus is definitely one that elevates the position of man as the highest level of life in the world.

Around the city is a well-organized plan for development allowing space for more parks, gardens, sports areas, and housing development. Our city is growing, and we work hard to help everyone see that they are important to the development of the city.

As a result, we have one of the lowest crime rates in the world. Our economy is incredible. We have invested heavily in the development of a market plan that benefits the people and provides an incredible amount of resources for the continued development of our infrastructure.

Day by day our development exceeded our plans and allowed us to begin to dream of greater possibilities. We soon began to believe that there was nothing we could not do or accomplish. This led to the development of another concept, and at the center of this concept was the replica of the Garden of Eden.

There were obvious parallels: We lost something there. At the same time we gained an awareness of all that we could do. We saw that we could make our dreams a reality because of our abilities. It seemed like there was no limit to what we could accomplish when we worked together. So why not apply this ability and unity to recover what we lost in the Garden, God?

The more we talked and discussed the idea, the more excited we became. We asked some of the architects what they thought, and they gathered and began to work on the tower project. When they presented their plan, we became very animated about the idea of a tower reaching to heaven. A tower that would bring us back into God's presence.

I and the council approved the idea, and when we presented it to the city we were overwhelmed by the level of support we received. In fact, I don't think anyone opposed the idea of the tower project. As the word spread beyond our city, we saw more and more people moving to Babel to live and be part of the project, which would bring God back to us by going to him in the heavens.

Let me share right now that we made one serious error in this...an error that would only be revealed when God responded. We mistakenly thought we could control access to God and that our efforts would, in a sense, force Him to respond to us.

Well, the work on the tower began. We set up a work schedule so that everyone could be a part of the project and not be impacted by their involvement. The impact was incredible. People were excited. Life was great. Skilled people came from all around to join in the work. People not only participated

willingly, but donated their free time, resources, and money towards the tower project.

Day by day the tower grew. The first levels were slow in taking shape, but that was to be expected. Foundation work is hard work and not easily seen. This was probably the most difficult time in the project, but when the first story became visible, people began to actually see results, and the work moved rapidly forward.

At this point everyone really got excited, and we could see significant advances every day. Soon the tower was higher than any other structure and could be seen as one entered the city. It was not long before it was visible from miles outside of the city. It was impressive, and the donations flowed in for the tower project.

As mayor, I was constantly being invited to talk about the tower project and what it meant. I truly believed that soon we would be high enough to reach the heavens and in contact with God. It didn't matter that no one was quite sure just how high that might be, but we were convinced that at some point the height would be sufficient to cause God to respond to us...a height that would make it impossible for Him to deny us anything we wanted. We would regain God, and in doing so, have control of His presence.

That was the mistake that we made, and as a result we began to worship our abilities and the tower, instead of seeking God through a relationship. The more we worked, and the more we talked, the more we focused on how great we were and our power to influence God.

It was at one of those meetings, when I was explaining this vision and encouraging the people toward the goal of gaining control of God, that it happened! One minute I was talking and everyone was cheering, and the next minute there was chaos. Every word I spoke came out as gibberish. I turned to my council, but everything they said made no sense to me. I called the guard, but even he just looked confused. Nobody could understand anyone else.

The confusion only grew. The work came to a grinding halt, since no one could communicate with anyone else. The markets were the worst. How can you buy and sell when you're unable to understand what each other is saying? I tried to organize meetings to deal with the situation, but no one understood what I was saying.

Well not everyone. I soon discovered that my immediate family could understand me, but there was a randomness to this that complicated our life. My son and his wife could understand me, but my daughter and her husband couldn't. They could, however, understand his parents. Not surprisingly, families became divided and drifted apart.

It did not take long for the dispersion to begin. Small groups of people who could understand each other, began packing up and leaving. Day by day, Babel began to diminish until it became abandoned. The unfinished tower in its center, visible for miles, was a constant reminder of the confusion and false hope it represented.

It represented a false hope to which man often falls prey...the false hope that man can reach God by his own efforts. It

represented the confusion that occurs in our hearts when we depend on our own abilities, believing we can control God

I am still here in Babel. The tower did work, but not in the way I had planned. The tower did cause God to reveal Himself, but as the One in control, not as One who could be controlled. I will stay here and share what I have learned with anyone who will listen. It will be a challenge, because we will have to learn how to communicate and learn each other's language. I will also be sure my family does not forget the lesson we have learned.

Wife of Potiphar – Trap

I am a beautiful woman. I know it, and the people agree. It is amazing what you can get when you are beautiful. So many wealthy and powerful people wanted to marry me, and they were ready to offer great treasures to marry a truly beautiful woman. At last, one family made an offer that my parents felt was worthy of my beauty and decided they should accept.

Potiphar is from a wealthy and well-connected family socially. He is part of Pharaoh's court. When my parents told me they had agreed, I was excited. This marriage would allow me to enter the world of the elite of Egypt. I gladly accepted their decision and began planning how to use my beauty to influence my husband and others, to give me all I desired.

I soon gained access to the finest products the world had to offer. My clothing and jewelry were the best you could buy. Now I could truly show my beauty and enjoy the attention of the men and the jealousy of the ladies of the court.

Then one day, my level of access to all that I desired increased even more. My husband had bought a young slave, who had an uncanny ability to make wise decisions related to investments and work. Our wealth and influence exploded, and we became more influential and desired at the court. We now were the ones importing rare goods, which meant I was the first to wear or reveal the latest in styles.

Now, not only were the women more attentive and jealous, the men became very attentive to me. I suddenly was in a position of wealth and power that I had never dared to imagine. The men came to me for my help in meeting my husband about business ventures and decisions. I loved it, until my husband's focus began to shift. He was no longer interested in anything related to the management of what he owned. Instead, he had

turned it all over to Joseph. If I asked him anything related to the operation of our estate and business, he simply said I had to consult Joseph. His only focus now was on decisions about what he would eat and how he would enjoy his new-found leisure time.

That became frustrating. With that decision I had lost my influence over my husband. I still received wonderful clothes and jewelry, but not like before. Joseph had little interest in the issues of the court or what I might want, and I soon learned that being the wife of a powerful man had little influence on Joseph.

I began to despise my husband. He began to look weak and insignificant, since he had relinquished control of everything to a slave, a worthless slave. And this slave was preventing me from having whatever I wanted.

Then I saw something I had not paid attention to in all this. Joseph, who was dirty, undernourished and disheveled, when we bought him, had become a well-built handsome man. I thought about this and then realized that my beauty could be used to entice him and get what I wanted. It had worked on my husband, as well as all the men I encountered in the court. If I could charm him, or cause him to act inappropriately towards me, then I would be able to control him, either because he was so enamored with me, or because I could threaten him with exposure for his behavior. This could be a means of restoring my power and influence in the court.

So, I began to flirt with him. Nobody paid attention to this, because they had seen me do it many times before, and you don't say anything against your master's wife, lest you wind up in prison or worse. This flirting had always worked before. Men welcomed it, and most women were generally too afraid

to say or do anything to stop it...especially when the woman flirting with her husband was very powerful.

Surprisingly, Joseph just ignored all my attempts at flirting. I became bolder and began to invite him to my room, hoping to seduce him or trap him into an indiscretion. However, he knew exactly what I was doing and what I wanted. He refused, saying that he could not do such a thing because of the trust my husband had placed in him. He would not dishonor him.

It became very clear that he would not respond to me, nor be trapped by me. He made this even more apparent by the way he organized his days and his work. He made sure that I was not present, if he needed to enter the house, and only if my husband were present. He was a cautious and astute man. Also, my husband is quite jealous when it comes to me and, though I have used my beauty to get what I want from men, I have always been careful not to trigger his jealousy, except when it got the results I wanted.

Then one day, I saw Joseph enter the house. He must have been quite distracted by what he was doing, because he did not see me or realize my husband was gone. I thought...here is my chance to try one more time to seduce him or trap him. I quietly walked up behind him and wrapped my arms around him. I whispered in his ear and tried to kiss him on the neck. His response was to spin around and back away. But in that motion, I manage to grasp his cape in an attempt to hold on to him. He simply slipped out of it and fled from the house.

There I stood with his cloak in my hands, and I was furious! But in my anger, I overreacted and screamed "rape!" I should have kept silent and sent him a message later, threatening to lie and cause him to be put in jail, if he continued to rebuff me. But my anger and embarrassment at being rejected, as if I

had been slapped in the face, prevented me from thinking logically. When the workers came, I stood there, shouting that Joseph had tried to force himself on me. I refused to move until my husband came, and I repeated my story, knowing exactly how his jealousy would affect him. Well, he did as I expected, and Joseph was thrown into Pharaoh's jail without any chance to explain himself or be given a trial. Slaves have no rights.

Unfortunately, my return to power and influence lasted only briefly. The next time I saw Joseph he had been brought before Pharaoh to interpret a couple of dreams, which he did. Pharaoh surprised me by asking advice from a slave. The advice was apparently so good, that Pharaoh took the slave and made him the second most powerful man in the kingdom. That was some promotion!

I never returned to the court after that. The moment Joseph was placed in control, I knew my ability to influence others was over. This man would not be susceptible to my wiles and beauty, and I would risk having my lie exposed and so cause further ruin.

The selfish use of my beauty and my desire for revenge at being rejected had really backfired. Even my husband rarely went to court now, because of all that had happened and the fact that everyone knew he was the one who had thrown Joseph into prison. To be honest, Joseph never retaliated or threatened me or my husband. He has proved to be an incredible leader, one the people trust because of his integrity. He is a wise man and highly honored in Egypt. As for me, I am just another beautiful woman.

Questions to think about: What do you do to influence others?
Why do you want to influence others? What do you use to
influence others? Are there good and bad ways to do this?

Pharaoh – Ruler of all Egypt – Egotism

I grew up in the most powerful nation in the world. I watched my grandfather rule and then my father. They had the power of life and death over everyone in the nation. But now, here I stand on the banks of the Red Sea and wonder: How did I manage to destroy the greatest nation on the earth? How did a slave, a nobody, come to have more power than me and without an army?

Why didn't...? How could this...? So many questions, and I know the answer, but until today, until today, I was blinded by... well, let me tell you what blinded me so...

At the time of my birth, my father was at the peak of his power. He ruled a huge kingdom. He was worshiped as a god, a living, breathing god. But at the time of my birth, something began to change. A creeping, insidious fear entered his heart and that of other leaders. For centuries we had allowed a foreign people to live among us. They had been allowed in by a previous dynasty. Allowed, because one of their people had saved Egypt from a famine. Well, my grandfather and father had conquered that dynasty and saw the possibility of freeing Egyptians from menial labor by using this people as our slaves.

And so began the great expansion and a very impressive era of construction.

These Hebrews were a weak people, weak because they had no ability to defend themselves and were easily enslaved. Anyone who rose up as a leader was quickly removed. They submitted to being enslaved because they believed that one

day their God would rescue them. My father made sure they had no time or opportunity to rebel. In fact, many of their own people betrayed anyone who dared to resist and they became foremen. This further demoralized the people and made them more obedient. My father's status as living god increased, and all Egypt worshiped him.

There was only one thing that disturbed my father. It was the rate at which this group multiplied. Their birthrate far exceeded ours, and the children were healthier and stronger. Now the threat was not just the rise of a rebel leader, but the sheer numbers, which would make it easy for them to succeed if presented the right opportunity. To prevent this, my father ordered the death of all male babies that were born. At first the order met with little success, because he depended on the midwives, who failed to carry out the order or report the birth.

Their numbers increased so dramatically that it was decided the army would make regular inspections to find and kill any child under the age of one. It was not hard to convince the soldiers to do this. They were offered special positions, special considerations, and quickly saw the threat of this people to the Egyptian way of life. In fact, all Egyptians began to hear and see the Hebrews as a threat to all they enjoyed, if this people were not controlled, even if it meant killing babies to do so.

Now is where I enter the picture, along with that accursed slave, Moses. We were born about the same time. He should have died, but my father's sister rescued him. In a moment of weakness my father allowed him to live. His sister had been unable to have children, so when she found an abandoned baby slave boy and begged to raise him as her own, my father

gave in to her desperate pleas. This set the stage for my trouble, and as a result Moses and I grew up together. He had the same training as I did, but I knew he didn't belong. One day, he realized it and tried to protect one of his people by killing an Egyptian soldier: a crime punishable by death.

And now came the second "moment of weakness." My father had become fond of Moses and then for a second time, he let his feelings influence his better judgment. He should have known better as the living god, but he allowed himself to be human. So, he let Moses go, and that brings us to the present.

And now, I am the one who has to deal with the situation. It was my father's weakness that caused the problem, but I will not be weak like him. I am the living god of Egypt. How dare Moses challenge my authority? How dare he interfere with my rights as ruler of Egypt? How dare he suggest I let my greatest resource, the evidence of my great power, walk away? Just because his god told him I should do this or be destroyed?

I stood firm. I would not be weak. My priests were telling me it is the finger of god, but I am the finger, hand, mind, and body of a god! They are becoming like my father, whose weakness brought us here. Horrible things are happening. The finger of god they say. But then I remember what happens when a living god is weak and bows to emotions and the pressure of others, and I stand firm. I am Egypt, I will not be told to serve anyone.

The people cry, my son dies, and I finally, in weakness, let them go. And the work stops on all monuments. The envoys from other countries are watching. I can hear them talking. Egypt is ripe for the picking. They think we are demoralized,

that the pharaoh is weak, so weak he can't even control his own slaves. That word burns in my thoughts...weak, failure...and again I decide I will not be weak like my father was. I will not make the mistake of letting them control my life. And so I take the army, all of them, after the Hebrews. I am going to bring them back and destroy Moses. I will restore my power, restore Egypt. I will be the living god I am for all of Egypt.

We chase them and find them trapped between us and the sea. It is almost too easy, and then it happens...the wind blows, the sea opens, and they are running across. All I can see is that my slaves, my power, is escaping, and so I send the army after them. All of them. I am about to claim the victory when it happens. The sea rushes back and swallows up all of my army. It is staggering to behold. In a moment the greatness--what was left of it--is gone. Nobody will want to come to conquer us. They will be afraid because of all the plagues, and this will terrify them even more. There is nothing left, and in my weakness, I let it all happen.

My fear of looking weak has destroyed my family and my nation. This fear blinded me to the truth, blinded me from seeing that there is only one true God. Every time I tried to appear strong, it was a lie to cover up my true weakness: My belief that I am the ruler of anything.

All gone and for what?

Questions to think about: What are the areas of weakness in your life? What are you doing to try to hide from them and convince others you are not weak? What will be the price of

such dishonesty in your life, the lives of those you love, and the people around you?

Dathan, Abiram, and Korah – Power

Dathan: We want to talk to you about what happened to us.

Korah: How our false confidence caused the destruction of our entire families and many friends who foolishly followed us.

Abiram: A little background will help you understand why we chose to oppose Moses... a serious miscalculation on our part.

Korah: When we were in Egypt, we thought we were smart, and when we saw an opportunity to improve our status under Pharaoh, we took it.

Dathan: Life was hard, and you either were the ones making bricks and hauling materials, or you were in charge, telling others what to do.

Abiram: The Egyptian foremen were always seeking people who could help them better control the workforce and speed up the work.

Dathan: We were shrewd, and when we suggested ways to motivate the workers and even reported those who were intentionally hindering the work, we began to gain favor with them.

Korah: We developed a network of informers that fed us information, which we used to further improve our status with the foremen. Soon we were put in charge and given better living conditions.

Abiram: Step by step, we showed them we could do a better job of motivating the workers and keeping them in line. As part of this process we gathered together, secretly of course,

quantities of food and other key items, which we used as rewards for those who aided us.

Korah: Our divisions became some of the most productive and efficient ones in producing brick and transporting materials. As a result, we were rewarded and given more freedom and power.

Dathan: This allowed us to identify other Jews and set them up to duplicate what we were doing. Step by step, we developed a structure that allowed us to control more and more of the work and continued to improve our lifestyle. While not equal to those we answered to, we were living well.

Abiram: Everything was going well, and we were enjoying life. Then Moses showed up, and we lost it all.

Dathan: We opposed him and his push for freedom. At first, we thought we might win and be further rewarded. Those first plagues caused so much pain and misery for our people, that they presented an incredible opportunity for us to prove our worth to Pharaoh.

Korah: By reminding the people that the source of their misery resulted from Moses' actions, we were encouraging them to reject Moses and his efforts gain our freedom. Then things began to change, because the plagues didn't stop, and the Egyptians started turning their anger on anyone who was a Jew.

Abiram: Suddenly we were no longer wanted. We were no longer seen as benefactors but as members of the group causing all the trouble. Now, instead of letting us stay because

of all we had done to help them, we were driven away with all the other Jews.

Korah: So, we had a secret meeting with our foremen and came to an agreement. If we could cause Moses to fail, and then convince the Jews to return to their work, we would be well rewarded.

Dathan: Our next plan of action was to begin a campaign of complaining and criticizing. Every time something went wrong, we moved among the people causing dissent and suggesting that since we were from the same tribe as Moses, shouldn't we have the same right to lead the nation as Aaron and Moses? Why should two brothers have all the power?

Abiram: Our campaign, however, had its setbacks. Sometimes the people overreacted, and many died as a result, so we used that to further incite the people. What kind of leader allows his people to suffer in such a manner, we thought!

Dathan: Later, when we failed to enter the promised land, we again saw our opportunity to convince many of the leaders to join us in opposing Moses and his self-appointed leadership. We rejected all his claims of God speaking to him and declared that we had done a better job of serving the people than Moses. They had had homes and food and a level of security under us in Egypt.

Korah: But what did they have now? Only constant threats from Moses, declaring that God was upset and they would be punished. More people had died in the desert than had ever died under us in Egypt.

Abiram: We made one big miscalculation. Moses saw it and let us challenge him. We came to realize that he did, in fact, know God and was following God's directions. We, however, did not and were guided by our own selfish desire for control and position.

Korah: We wanted our old status and power. We wanted our old life restored and believed that if we got rid of Moses, then we could go back to Egypt and our past life. We also believed the people would be more than ready to follow us. Even if it meant being enslaved again, because they would think that anything would be better than what lay ahead: forty years of wandering and eating manna every single day.

Dathan: That miscalculation proved fatal. In our pride and arrogance, we believed that leadership was based only on personal skills and abilities. That it had nothing to do with God's choosing.

Korah: Then the ground began to shake. There was a strange, sinking feeling, and too late we learned our mistake and everything went black as we fell. Being a leader is not about who has the power, but it is about who is truly following God's direction.

Dathan: Building a structure without God is a picture of what happened to us: building on an unstable location that can collapse at any moment and destroy, not only you, but anyone who thinks like you and follows a person instead of God.

Ten Spies – Civil Disobedience

Pre meeting planning

Shammua: Are we all agreed?

Shaphat: Yes, we need to be sure the people hear us first.

Igal: If Caleb or Joshua get a chance to speak before we do, they may be able to convince the people to go, and that would be disastrous.

Palti: Good. I have chosen key people, and they are ready to help delay them from arriving at the meeting until we are done with our presentation.

Gaddiel: I have a group that will help you with that. Among them are Dathan and Abiram who are more than ready to help us carry out our plan.

Meeting with the people

Gaddi: Gather around and hear our report. We have done as Moses instructed us. We have traveled throughout the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to us as their descendants.

Ammiel: We took our time and did a thorough job of investigating the nature of the land and its ability to provide what we need. And we studied carefully the people who are currently inhabiting the land. The people we have been told we must defeat and destroy.

Sether: As you can see by the items we have brought back with us, the land is incredibly productive. Almost as productive as the land of Goshen where we lived in Egypt. It is perfect for growing most of the food we are used to eating, plus some new foods.

Nahbi: We also encountered land in the mountains and other areas suitable for raising livestock. There are many places with magnificent views in those areas. It will present some challenges, since it is not as well-watered as the lands we used to live in and caring for animals in mountains means extra work.

Geuel: We saw evidence of great natural resources. There are extensive forests that will provide lumber for construction and many other needs. They have quarries that will provide stone for construction of homes and walls. We also noted they have access to a number of critical metals essential to creating tools and weapons.

Shammua: We noted that there were well-developed paths for movement of caravans. We actually encountered one traveling from Arabia to the north, laden with spices, cloths, and all manner of goods. The land sits at the crossroads of great trade routes, which will give us access to many desirable items. But, they will be costlier than in Egypt. The power of Egypt attracted many, many traders, which kept the costs down there.

Shaphat: On the surface it looks like a paradise, with everything we need to live and prosper but...

Igal: We became greatly concerned as we learned about the nature of the peoples who currently occupy the land.

Hoshea: The nations (yes, they are nations, not just small tribes) we have been told to destroy are not weak and disorganized. They are nations of warriors, who have entered the land and conquered it. They took it from others by force.

Palti: They are well-trained in war and aware of the need for a well-planned defense, and the need to defend themselves

from those who might try to take the land from them, as they themselves had done. Jericho is a key example of this reality. It is a fortress, with immense walls and a well-planned defense.

Gaddiel: We also noted that there were giants in this land. They too are well-trained in war and inhabit the mountainous areas, where they have built strong cities with formidable walls to defend themselves.

Gaddi: This land may look like a paradise, but it is occupied, and those who occupy it will fight to stay and defend what they believe is theirs. They have no interest in our claim that the land was promised to us almost 500 years ago. Compared to them and their experience in battle, we are like grasshoppers, easy to crush and defeat.

Ammiel: In Egypt we didn't have to fight to live or defend ourselves from others. The Egyptians gave us a very productive place to live, and they protected us from the attacks of foreign invaders, who might try to take the land from us.

Sether: You all know how when those from the south conquered the previous regime, we were untouched by the war. We lived in peace during that time. It was not our fight. Yes, they made us their slaves and life was difficult, but we had our land and our homes. We were able to continue living as families and survived.

Nahbi: This war of conquest will take years. Why? Because Moses has told us that we will have to fight for the land. God will not send plagues to destroy the enemy, as in the past. He may help us at times, but it has been made clear that we will be expected to fight. That means some of us will surely die in the process.

Geuel: It also means we will have to struggle for food. It has been suggested that once we enter the land, the manna will stop. I know we are getting tired of it, but at least we don't have to work to produce this food. There is no guarantee that we will be able to find food, nor will the people trade or sell to us because we will be the enemy. It is even likely, if we are successful in the beginning, that they will destroy all their reserves to hinder our attack on them.

Shammua: And it will not be easy to farm the land and care for livestock at the same time we are fighting this long war.

Shaphat: Again, Egypt was better. We always had plenty of leeks and onions, as well as other foods to give us more variety than just having manna every day. Furthermore, they always allowed us to assign people to do the farming, so we could feed ourselves. And, when it was necessary to keep the work of pharaoh moving forward, the Egyptians did generously supply food for the workers.

Igal: So, yes, the land is fruitful, a place of milk and honey, as we have been told, but there are powerful enemies in the land, and it will be a challenge to feed ourselves, protect our families, and wage war. We will have to continue living like we are now for many years to come.

Palti: Back in Egypt we would have houses waiting for us, and we are sure the Egyptians would be glad to have us return as workers for their projects and servants for their homes. They would welcome our help, so they could return to their own way of living again.

Gaddiel: Hear us! It will be better to go back to Egypt, to what we know and already have, than to enter this land of unknowns and great risk. We cannot recommend that you listen to Caleb

and Joshua, who think it will be easy to take the land. We cannot recommend that you follow them and Moses into this land, knowing the huge risks it would involve.

Gaddi: We will let Joshua and Caleb have their chance to speak now. They will surely try to convince you to trust God. They think we should take the risk. As you listen to them, remember they are only two people, and we are the majority of those who have been given the task of giving you wise council.

Ammiel: One other thing... Remember this, Joshua is an assistant to Moses. So, it is to be expected that he would support what Moses says. That leaves only one voice, that of Caleb. Who will you listen to? The ten of us, or him?

Discussion: How often do we settle for what we know, instead of trusting God and entering the unknown? How often do we choose the path of less risk to ourselves, instead of obedience?

Read the following passages and consider what God wants to do, if we faithfully follow his direction.

1 Peter 1:6-9; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Romans 8:28

What is gained, when we willingly risk what we have, to receive what God has promised?

Balaam – fame

You all know my story, but just in case, let me tell it briefly.

I was the greatest soothsayer of that time. People came from many nations to consult me about profound issues. They did this, because I had access to the world of spirits. This contact also made me aware of the gods (just local names for spirits), and that there was one God who made all those gods nervous.

How did I know this? Well, for the last forty years, more and more of the questions I was asked related to a group of people who followed this God. And more and more of the information I received, included warnings not to pursue anything related to them.

I did not fully understand why I was hearing more about them, but I ignored it until Balak sent messengers asking me to curse this group. Imagine my surprise while I was consulting my normal sources, to have them blocked, and this God, who I had been hearing about, giving me a very clear message: I was to tell them to go home. I was to explain that God had told me not to accept their contract.

This was a bit hard to do, because they had offered the biggest retainer I'd ever received. But I had learned from experience when to listen to the advice I received. In this case, from the very God they wanted me to oppose, by cursing his selected people.

Well, Balak was not happy and sent another delegation. The same thing happened, but this time I was frightened by having the God, who caused all my spirit sources to tremble, talking to me. The men in this second delegation were not happy with my response, either. To be honest, I was not excited about

sending them away. They had increased their offer. I could have been incredibly wealthy if I had accepted.

Not long after that, Balak himself came and made the same request, increasing my pay again. I told him I could not go unless the God of the people he wanted cursed would allow me to go, but I agreed to perform the rituals and see if there was any change. Imagine my surprise and joy, when I was told I could go, but I could say only what I was told to say. So, I sent them on their way, with the promise that I would be where they needed me to be, at the agreed-on time.

When the time came to go, I saddled up my donkey and headed for the meeting place. That is when my donkey went crazy. In one place he took off into the fields by the road. He returned only after I had beaten him. Then he almost crushed my leg, trying to leave the trail in another spot. Again, he refused to move until I beat him severely. Finally, in a narrow place in the road, that stubborn donkey just laid down and would not move. That time, the strangest thing happened! As I raised my whip to beat it, my donkey spoke to me and challenged my treatment of him. I was speechless! The donkey was right. Instead of beating it, I should have wondered at his unusual behavior, and that is when my eyes were opened.

Up until this point, I thought I had an ability to see into the spiritual world. But I had never seen a real angel...until now. Here, before me stood an angel, just out of arm's reach, with a flashing sword in its hands poised to strike if I came any closer. Amazed, I realized that my donkey had saved me three times from certain death. I stepped back and bowed, to show respect and to control the trembling of my legs at the reality of what could have happened. At that moment, the angel

spoke. He told me God would let me go, but I must speak only the words given me by God. I listened and realized that if I didn't, I would not make it home alive.

When I finally arrived, I warned Balak and his people that I could not say anything other than what God told me to say. I recounted the story of my journey, but I could see in his face that he didn't believe me and hoped that he had offered me enough money to do what he wanted. That did not work. My experience with the angel was more than sufficient to prevent me from cursing the people of this God in any way. It was a heady experience having this God, who was clearly more powerful than any spirit with which I had had contact before, speak to me. The spirits trembled at the mention of His name. So I did as I was commanded. I pronounced words of blessing on the people of Israel, not the curses Balak desired. It didn't matter at the time. I was filled with wonder at hearing from this God, who had such power.

It was not long, however, before I learned something else. This contact with God changed my access to my former sources. They refused to respond to me, and people were not coming to consult me. I was no longer of value, and my prestige and power among the people was fading. I became angry with this God, who had revealed himself to me but now was causing me to lose what I had worked so hard to establish.

Then a thought came to me. Was there a different way to earn the money offered to me by Balak that did not involve cursing this people in violation of the orders I had received? Was there a way to give Balak the power to defeat them? If I could find an answer to this question, maybe they would give me all they had offered me and more.

I began to gather information about this people and soon learned there was one thing that could result in their defeat. If they were to disobey God in some way, then He might withdraw his protection, and Balak could defeat them. Also, I convinced myself that only I had been ordered not to curse them and so would be free from any negative consequences. The blame would fall on them, because of their disobedience, and it would not be related to anything I said or did.

Once I learned this, I quickly went to Balak, and he agreed to meet with me. I asked him what he would do, if I could show him how to defeat this people? He looked at me with no small amount of doubt, because of what had happened. But he told me to wait outside while he consulted with his advisors. When I was asked to come back, they gave me the answer I had hoped for. They agreed to pay me what I had been offered in the beginning, if I could show them how to defeat the Israelites.

When I told them my idea, they quickly saw the brilliance of the plan. They would get the Israelites to disobey their God so that He would destroy them. It was brilliant, because they would not have to risk going to war and also would be able to seize all the Israelite property. They could pay me and end up with much more. So they paid me my fee, and I went home, wealthy and with a new level of fame and power.

The plan was working, until some really righteous leaders perceived what was happening. They gathered up others to help counter the scheme and began killing any Jew or person sent by Balak. They even killed the daughter of Zur, a Midianite tribal leader, as part of this purge of sin. The next thing I heard was that Israel had declared war, and Balak was fleeing for his life. The next message I got was that Balak was

looking for me, and that Israel had somehow found out that I was the source of this plan to cause Israel to disobey. So now, both groups were looking for me. The word was that if either of them found me; I was to be killed on sight.

I began to regret having let my greed for money and desire for power and fame to control my decisions. Well, I have to run. I can hear people shouting, and some are shouting directions to my house! I have an escape plan, though. One last word of advice...Never let money or power or fame convince you to disobey God, or influence others to do the same.

Achan – greed

My family and I are about to be punished. Well, executed is the more accurate word. I am not happy but, if I am honest with you, I knew the risk, as did my family. So, just in case there will be a last-minute reprieve, which I seriously doubt, I will try to explain my thinking and what brought us, as a family, to this moment.

You have probably heard the stories about how we gained our freedom from Egypt. Those days were incredible and frightening. We were happy to see the Egyptians punished, but we were also afraid that there would be serious repercussions, and we would be the ones to pay the price, not Moses and those close to him.

We almost did pay the price when we were trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. We were jubilant when the sea opened up, and a path was created for us to cross. But our jubilation didn't last long. We were now in a desert and short on water. The happiness returned as God supplied water. We soon arrived at Mt. Sinai, and Moses disappeared for 40 days. Some of the leaders convinced us to let Aaron take some of the gold we had to make a golden calf to worship. Yes, we had gold, because the Egyptians were so glad to see us go, that they had given us gold, jewels, and other costly materials.

Then without warning, Moses returned, and thousands died as God reacted in anger at our unfaithfulness. Once things settled down, we agreed to obey the laws. What else would you do when faced with the angry reaction of a jealous God? As if to make sure we would not forget this, we were instructed to build a tabernacle as a constant reminder of God's presence, and for me, it was a constant reminder of the danger of disobeying.

In all of this activity, we ran out of food. When we complained, God provided manna every day and quail when needed...nothing fancy, but enough to fill our bellies and provide the strength we needed to continue the journey. I agreed with many who grumbled about the lack of variety. No matter how good something tastes, after years of eating it, you get tired of it and want something else. Fortunately, I have managed to avoid getting caught up in the complaining or joining the wrong group. Disobedience comes at a high price, and that price is often death.

Then our leaders, well 10 of them, convinced the majority not to enter the promised land... another costly act of disobedience. That resulted in our wandering in the wilderness until everyone over 21 had died. I was only 20, so I lived through all of that, but I have had to watch family and friends die for the last 40 years. I decided it was best to be patient and obedient, waiting for a way out of this endless cycle of struggle.

A little background here would be helpful in understanding. Unlike in Egypt, where it was possible to improve one's status and situation, if you were astute, here in the promised land there were no opportunities. You couldn't gather extra manna to maybe create a side business to earn something. And after we crossed the Jordan the manna stopped being provided. So now we had to spend time hunting for food. Life was getting complicated. The more industrious were figuring out how to gather extra and create little businesses, quietly. No one was sure how Joshua and his God would react.

Yes, I say his God. I had grown weary of being bottled up in the system of laws and lack of opportunities. And for some reason, my family didn't receive as much from the Egyptians

as others. Don't know why. Anyway, I began to think that maybe there was a way to improve our life. As a family we talked about the situation, and we all agreed that we would watch for an opportunity to get ahead, to find a way to give us an advantage down the road. We also felt like Joshua was not as powerful as Moses or as connected to God as Moses was. That error in my judgment appeared correct at the time. Joshua seemed a little more brash in assuming what he could do, and to me it looked like he acted without consulting God. This is something Moses never did. What I didn't realize, was that God was indeed communicating to him but in a different way, and there lay my error.

When Joshua announced that we were going to attack Jericho, we were a bit worried. Then when he announced that everything in the city had to be destroyed, we began to talk and realized that there surely must be things of wealth in such a city. If everything was to be destroyed, we might be able to find something valuable to sneak out of the city. This could be our chance to create a cache that we could use later to establish ourselves and advance economically, when we were able to settle in the land.

And that is just what happened. The night before the attack, we prepared a place to hide whatever we might find. Everything went as we had hoped. Everyone was so busy attacking the city and destroying everything, that they didn't notice when I found the gold and other things. More important, no one saw me and my family sneak it out of the town and into my tent. All went perfectly as planned. Not even Joshua knew what we had done. So, we felt pretty safe, because if Joshua didn't know, and wasn't talking to God as I had wrongly assumed, then maybe God would not take notice either.

Joshua did as we had hoped. He did not consult God before the attack on Ai. It was a smaller town, not as well-protected. So, Joshua sent only some of the army, but more than enough to destroy the town. However, here is what happened. The people of Ai gathered up their courage and counter-attacked our army, but our men were not prepared for any retaliation, and many died before they could escape.

Now Joshua became concerned, and he did what we had seen Moses do over and over, with disastrous results for those who disobeyed. He went before God and prayed. When Joshua reappeared, he announced that God had told him someone had disobeyed and had taken some of the forbidden objects from Jericho. He asked the guilty party to confess. I thought maybe someone else had had the same idea as I had. So, I remained silent, which was a disastrous decision.

When no one offered a confession, Joshua started casting lots to find the guilty party. I had seen this done in Egypt, when people wanted to learn about the future or decide what to do. I had also noted that the answer was often wrong, so Joshua's decision to cast lots did not worry me too much. First it chose the right tribe and then the right clan. That's when I became worried. Every time Joshua cast the lots; the decision was correct! Now it was just me and my brothers left. One by one, they were eliminated, until it was just me and my family. Joshua asked me to confess. I was trapped. I mean... what can you say or do at that point? It didn't matter what I said, because no one was going to believe me. They would search my tent, no matter what. So, I confessed, hoping that the punishment would not be too severe. Big mistake!

I tried to protect my family, by saying they were not responsible or to blame. Joshua just looked at me, and his

frown told me that lie would not work. You don't dig a hole in which to hide things inside your tent without others close to you knowing what is happening. And, if they don't report you, that means they are in agreement with your actions.

Well, I regret that is my story. I was only trying to find a way to make life better for myself and my family in the future. Up until that moment, I had managed to avoid getting caught up in opposing God. I had thought that since I was not opposing God's direction, not complaining, not stealing from anyone, and the owners were all dead, that my actions would be overlooked. That may work when dealing with the people around you, but clearly that does not work when dealing with God's commands.

The hard part is that my action has caused the death of many others, and as a result, many are angry with me and my family. But as I look at the people around us, I wonder why some died and others did not. Maybe in their hearts they wanted to do what I did, but didn't act on it? Clearly, God knows what is in our heart and sadly, our sin has consequences which will bring harm to others. This also means, at some point, that we will have to pay a price for our actions.

The time has come. I hope you will learn from my story the importance of obedience...not just obedience to avoid trouble, but obedience that recognizes God's authority and honors him.

Abimelech – Vanity

Abelim, listen as I explain why I am here, ready to burn this tower down. I know you are not sure if we should do this, and you questioned the killing of my brothers.

But how dare you judge me for killing my brothers! You have no idea what it is like to be ridiculed and laughed at by your brothers, all 70 of them. I was the son of my father's slave, and for this, and no fault of my own, I was constantly abused and belittled.

Those 70 brothers lived a privileged life. They got whatever they wanted, because our father had saved Israel from the enemy. He lived like a king, and they enjoyed a life of ease and pleasure. Me, I was never allowed to share in any of those blessings and privileges. While our father was alive, things were tolerable, but when he died the abuse increased. I finally left, went to the town of Shechem, and began to plan my revenge.

It was not long, and I began to see how I might accomplish this. Those 70 brothers continued to expect people to provide them everything they desired. It was not long, and I could see a building discontent among many of those they ruled. This was especially evident in Shechem and other cities nearby. When the time was ripe, and the people had become very vocal about their discontent with the behavior of my brothers, I made my move.

I met the people of Shechem and asked if they truly enjoyed being ruled by such a mob. I asked them if it would not be better to have one ruler to support, instead of that mob. Their anger was such that they immediately accepted my idea and then gave me a large sum of money to organize a plan to free them from the rule of my brothers.

I had been planning for this and had been looking for other men like myself, who were seeking a way to obtain what had been denied them, because they were outcasts. There were many, who were more than willing to take the risk, if it meant wealth and power and a chance to get back at those they hated. So, I gathered a large group of them and paid them well to follow me. We immediately went to the town where my brothers lived, and we killed them all. That was the goal. Kill them and take over. I almost succeeded, but one brother, named Jotham, escaped.

He got away and went into hiding. The next time I saw him was when I had gathered all the people of Shechem and other cities, so they could proclaim me king. This was the final step in my plan to take my father's place and to enjoy the privileges and power that he had had. But just as we began the ceremony, my one surviving brother showed up. He was far enough away so that I couldn't catch him, but close enough for everyone to hear his words.

He asked if they had done what was right and honored the person who had saved them. Then he told this strange parable: One day the trees of the woods decided they wanted a king, so they searched among themselves for one who could rule. They first asked the olive tree, but it refused. Its reason for refusing came in the form of a question: "Why should I give up my oil, by which kings and men are honored, to rule over you?"

They then asked the fig tree, and it too responded with a question: "Why should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to rule over you?" Finally, they asked the thorn bush, who agreed and told them that if they really wanted it to rule over them, they must come and take refuge in its shade. However,

if they were lying, then fire would surely come out of it to destroy them.

I understood right away, that Jotham was comparing me to the thorn bush and warning all who listened, that if they were to crown me king, I would cause their destruction. I was enraged at his words, but before I could even respond, he had disappeared. I realized I must move quickly to resume the ceremony that had been interrupted so unexpectedly. Before anyone might come to understand and react to the meaning of that parable, I had to push forward with my plan. And they crowned me king.

For the next few years, things went well, but eventually they betrayed me. Without my permission, the people began to ambush and rob everyone passing through the area. As a result, everyone believed that I was responsible and that I had told them to do so. Then Gaal, that malcontent from Ebed, brought his brothers to Shechem and led them in a rebellion against me.

One faithful follower reported to me what was happening and told me how to defeat Gaal and his followers. We followed his advice and killed them all. But I did not limit my revenge just to Gaal and his group. I wanted revenge on everyone who had listened to him, and all who had been robbing people in my name. We finally trapped the last of the rebels in the temple of Baal and burned it down, killing them all. Still, that was not enough. I convinced myself that all of the towns who had supported me before, were also a part of this conspiracy and deserved to be destroyed, too.

So here we are in the next town. The attack was successful, and we have trapped the last of them in a tower and oww!

[Shift in narrator]

My name is Abelim. I have been recording Abimelech's story, and those were the last words he spoke. He had been telling me his story as we were attacking the tower. He and his men had placed branches around the tower to burn it down. He had just put a large branch at the base of the tower. As he turned to one of his men for a torch to light the fire, he was struck and killed by a large millstone. No one saw it coming. Everyone had been so occupied with building the fire, that they did not see a woman throw the millstone from the tower.

And so...the warning of Jotham was fulfilled, and both the thorn bush and its followers were destroyed.

Questions to think about:

Who do you blame for what is happening in your life? How do you respond to what you consider unfair treatment? Will making others suffer, so you can have what you want really work?

Delilah – Betrayal

I am here to tell you that women can control men. We can make them do what we want, and if they refuse, we know how to make them pay for not fulfilling our needs or complying with our wishes.

Some women may say my ways are not moral and helpful. They would contend that if we are truly strong and of value, then we don't need to use our emotions and sex to get what we want. They would say that an intelligent woman should be able to accomplish the same thing without the emotional bondage of what I do.

Well, if that is true, then why did I succeed?

Let me give you some background. I was not the first person who tried to control the man, Samson. There was at least one other, and she made a huge mess of everything.

Let me explain. She had the opportunity to marry a truly handsome and strong man, but she did not understand how to make use of his strength or how to connect with him. It was the wedding night. The guests were talking about this and that, and for some reason they challenged Samson to tell them a riddle. If he agreed and they solved the riddle, he would have to give each of them a new cloak. He responded that he would agree, if they in turn would also agree to each give him a cloak, if he stumped them with his riddle. They discussed the challenge together and decided that, among them, they surely could solve any riddle.

So, Samson told the guests his riddle, but they were stumped. The festivities continued, and they became more and more upset that the riddle could not be solved. One by one they approached Samson's bride and pressured her to get the

answer for them. Samson refused at first. But when they threatened to attack the bride's family and take what they needed to get the cloaks; she became afraid of them. Out of fear, she began to whine and cry and beg... all the things women might do to make their husbands give in to their wants.

Samson, as a new husband who was inexperienced in such tactics, finally gave in and told her the answer. She promptly told some of the guests, who then, with much relief, quickly called everybody together and answered the riddle publicly, so that everyone could hear, and they could all claim their prize. Samson became so enraged, that he left the wedding without his bride. The next day he returned with the 30 promised cloaks. It was later that we found out he had killed 30 people from the tribe of the wedding guests in retaliation. They in turn became so angry at Samson that they killed his bride and her parents, which only made Samson more enraged... a very dangerous thing to do.

But, that is not the point of telling this story. If Samson's bride had told him immediately what was happening and pleaded with him to protect her family, many lives could have been saved. Instead of being killed by those reacting to Samson's murderous actions, she and her parents would have been protected, and she likely would have gained greater influence over her husband, as a result. Instead, however, she did indeed show what a woman can do to get what she wants, but in this case, she picked the wrong goal. She tried to control her husband, in order to please someone else rather than herself and forgot to consider the consequences of her actions.

I, on the other hand, took a totally different approach. I too was contacted by a group of people and offered a great deal of money to learn a secret from Samson. They had learned that

Samson was visiting me regularly. He was a lonely man. Normally, I wouldn't have considered such a request from them, because I had seen what could happen when Samson got angry with my people. They always lost, and they usually lost a lot. I had also seen others try to trap him, only to have him destroy anyone and anything that got in his way.

I liked Samson. He was handsome, famous, and good to have around when there was trouble. I also learned that he was a lonely man. My people feared him, and that made sense, but his own people feared him as well. Actually, they feared that one day his actions might cause problems similar to what had happened with his bride and the 30 guests, only worse.

That made it easy to manipulate him to get whatever I wanted. It helped that I was also attractive and available when he needed me. But in the back of my mind, I also remembered this man was attacking my people when he was upset. He said that he was obeying the direction of his god. That didn't make a lot of sense to me, because none of his people seemed to believe that or follow him.

So, when the leaders of my people came to me and offered to pay me a lot of money if I were to discover the secret of his success, I gave their proposal some serious thought. Eventually I decided that, unlike the first woman, I could get what I wanted, and not even risk having him attack me.

I started out by making it a game. I played with him. Do you love me? Do you want to make me happy? Can I have whatever I want? Many of you know how this works, so I don't need to go into details. If you do it right, they get lulled into complacency, and then you ask for whatever it is that you really want. Also, it's important to pick a time when they are in a good mood. He looked at me and smiled. That smile told

me he was not upset for my asking, and he was willing to play the game. He wanted to show off, so I let him.

He gave me the wrong answer several times. Each time I tried to do what he had said to do, but he just smiled and tore everything apart. I realized right away what was happening. He was enjoying fooling me and showing off how strong he was. He was so proud of the fact that he could fool me. After the third time, though, I started the next phase...the pouting and whining about how he didn't trust me and why did he keep lying to me if he really loved me? Day after day I pestered him, teased and harassed him.

Slowly, he began to yield to my charms, and I found the means to accomplish my goal. I got him to talk about his birth and learned that he was not totally sure about his strength. He talked about how his parents had taught him never to drink wine, never to touch a dead animal, and other rules he was to follow regarding forbidden things. As we kept talking, I asked him if his strength had anything to do with those rules or forbidden things. That is when he told me about one other condition he was to obey. He was never to cut his hair. He told me that, while he had broken other rules, this one rule he had never broken. He admitted that if his hair were shaved, he would lose his strength. When he told me that, I realized he had given me the answer to the riddle of his strength.

I shifted gears and turned on all my charm. I became the grateful lover, who was so honored to be trusted and finally to be told the truth. He enjoyed it all and believed that I would not tell anyone. He became so relaxed that he fell asleep with his head in my lap. I signaled to someone to call a barber, and while I continued to talk, softly stroking his head, the barber cut off his hair. One more time I tested to see if he had indeed

told me the truth, and when he awoke and realized his hair had been cut, he collapsed. I could have knocked him over.

My people took him away and paid me all they had promised. I won twice. I had enjoyed the attention of a famous man, and I, a woman, had defeated him when no one else could. I became famous, and all the wealthy wanted me to come to their parties and events, so they could brag that I was their friend. Life was wonderful, until the night I was invited to the celebration of our god at the temple, and they brought out Samson to make fun of him. At first, I enjoyed the attention, but then I took a moment to stop and look at the man. I don't know if he saw me, but I saw two things that terrified me. Two things I had not seen since the days when he was my lover. The first was that his hair had grown long once again. The second was that the fire and fury in his eyes had returned. The same fire that was present when he was about to demonstrate his great strength, and someone would pay dearly for making him and his god angry. Then I really became terrified, as I saw him stand up, place his hands on the pillars to which he was chained, and begin to push. I realized too late what he was doing. He was going to destroy the temple. They had foolishly chained him to the key pillars. For a second, they didn't move, but then suddenly the pressure he exerted made them explode in movement, and the whole roof began to fall.

Survivor – I was standing outside when it all happened. It happened so fast, that no one escaped. The whole building collapsed and over 6000 people died. All our rich and famous, all our leaders and key soldiers, and I hear that the woman who made all this possible, Delilah, died as well...crushed by the very pillar Samson had shattered.

Seduction – Sexual Desire

What are you willing to do to get what you want? Do you think about how your desires will affect others? How do you respond, if someone denies you what you desire?

Micah – Lawless

You may not have heard of me. Most people finish the story of Samson and kind of skip through the rest of the book, hoping for another fun story to read. When they realize that I was not a judge or hero, they skip ahead to read about Samuel.

That has been the story of my life. I wonder sometimes if my decisions and attempts to make a name for myself have been the cause of my problem. Take a moment to listen to me. Don't do like the others and just skip ahead. I really need someone to listen and share their thoughts on my decisions and what has happened.

Like I said, even though my name is part of a bigger story, I almost disappear into the background and into insignificance. So here is my story. Sorry I am babbling now. Maybe that is part of my problem. I can never keep my thoughts in focus. Maybe that is why my story is skipped. I am not worth listening to and can't seem to make the right decision when I should. Or is it because I don't see the need to act? Sorry, here I am babbling again.

I was nobody until the day I stole a large amount of money from my mother. I thought I would move and start a new life and that, finally, I would become somebody. I was about to walk out the door, when I heard my mother utter a curse against whoever had stolen her money. That curse terrified me. Do you believe in curses? I tell myself I don't, but to hear those words uttered against me, and by my own mother, terrified me.

I promptly changed my mind and went straight to my mother and confessed that I had stolen the money. I fully expected her to disown me or do something to punish me for stealing from her. Instead, she shocked me by promising to make a cast idol

from the silver in the money and consecrate the rest to the Lord. Then she had the idol placed in my house to bless me.

I was impressed and thought maybe my life was about to change, and I would become more important because I had a valuable idol, an image of wealth and blessing, in my house. Not only that, she gave me the rest of the money. She did this because she had consecrated it to the Lord (in this case, the idol she made to represent the Lord). So, I took some of that money and made an ephod. You probably don't know what that is, do you? Well, an ephod is a special piece of clothing that a priest wears when serving as a priest before his god. It is a status symbol.

I also created other idols and built a shrine, a place for them, where I could go and worship. Now I needed someone to be my priest, who would present my offerings and requests to my idol, the image of my god. Since there were no priests living in my area, I decided that I could choose my own priest. One of my sons seemed interested, and so I made him our family priest. It didn't seem exactly right, but what did I know, since there were no more judges like in the past? Also, that last judge, Samson, really didn't teach anyone anything about what was right or not. He did as he pleased, and his god gave him strength to defeat the Philistines. Then, he died in one final act of revenge against his enemies.

Things were going quite well, and then a Levite passed through our region. He had actually taken the road that led him to our house. When I learned that he was looking for a place to serve, I moved quickly to invite him to be my priest. My son had been a poor choice, because he didn't know what he was doing. While he enjoyed the honor of being a priest, I

think he didn't especially like being my priest. It was complicated, being the priest of one's own father.

Well, the Levite quickly agreed to become my priest, especially after I offered to pay him a salary, plus feed and house him, as well. Now life was really looking good. My attempt to steal from my mother had resulted in my having a personal image of my god, a shrine where people could come and meditate, and now a Levite, who was trained to serve in a center of worship and could wear the ephod. Although, I must admit that the Levite did not know much more about how to worship than I did. No matter, he was my priest, and people came to my shrine to consult him and to leave gifts for him and for me. The people in our time had a pervasive feeling of being abandoned and forgotten...lost in a world with no idea of which god to worship...that anything was better than nothing.

My shrine with my Levite in charge gave us all a sense of control and access to the world of the gods. As word spread, people began to come from farther away, seeking what we sought. One day, the existence of our temple site drew a group of soldiers, men from Dan, who were looking for a new place to live. When they arrived, they amazingly recognized my priest. Apparently, he had passed through their area, when he was searching for a new home. They consulted with him, and he responded positively and encouraged them, which seemed like a good idea to me. If they were to succeed, it would attract more people, more recognition, and likely more gifts to our shrine.

Little did I know that day, what was going to happen. If had realized in time, I might have decided to move or take steps to

protect what I had. But I didn't know. Now I am worse off than I was before.

Those warriors came back with their whole army! Their exploratory trip had convinced them that they could move and take whatever they wanted from others. That must have been their attitude as they once more passed by my house. On that very day, I was visiting another village, hoping to improve on my business options, so I was not present when they came. Upon returning home, I discovered they had convinced my priest to go with them by making him a better offer: serve all of them, instead of just me, and get more in the process. He accepted their offer, and then they proceeded to take everything in my shrine. Greedy brutes!! Brazenly taking what they wanted with no thought of the needs of others.

Well, I did what I thought I must do. I organized many from around my community to go with me to recover my idols and priest. They were willing to help me, if I promised to provide something for them and the community, too. I quickly agreed, if only they would help me get back what was mine. We easily caught up with the army, and I boldly demanded that my property be returned! I guess my band of neighbors, which was actually bigger in number, was not sufficiently fearsome, though, to worry the soldiers. In fact, I think I saw some of them start to snicker and almost laugh.

Well, they calmly heard my demand and responded by threatening to attack me and my group, if I didn't just shut up, turn around, and go home. As they said this, they suddenly drew their swords, lifted their spears, and drew their bows. I took a step back to look over my shoulder. What I saw, convinced me to do as they said, because half of my group had

instantaneously faded into nothingness, and the other half looked as pale as dead men, ready to run like cowering dogs.

So...I slowly backed away, and when I had reached a reasonably safe distance, I turned and left. They smiled, my priest smiled, and then they kept everything they had taken. At that point I came to realize, it served me right. They took from me what I had tried to steal from my mother. The idol had been made from that money, the ephod and all the images as well. And regarding the priest, his salary had been paid by using that money, and all the food and housing expenses were covered by it as well.

Then I suddenly realized, I had better get home as fast as possible before those people who had come with me, in their attempt to recover what the army had taken, might decide to use that same tactic on me. Might they go to my shrine and my house and try to reclaim the gifts they had given me, or at least take something they could use or sell to replace them? Would they do such a thing? I soon found out, to my dismay...yes. That is just what happened!

I cursed them all, but realized I had no one to enforce my curse. Without my shrine and priest, no one feared me or what I might do. I was back to where I had been, when this had all started. No, I was worse off now. Back then, my mother still had her money, which I was about to steal. Now her money was gone, and my mother would probably curse me for losing it all. And now, who would want me as a friend? I had lost my mother's money, I had lost my shrine and priest, and I had nothing anyone would want. No, I was much worse off now, than if I had just stolen the money and risked the curse of my mother.

Actually, I am not sure why I should have bothered you at all with my story. It feels as if my life has no real purpose or direction. We do what we want, and get nowhere. Doesn't seem to matter if we do what is right or wrong, we end up in the same place. I wonder what would have happened if I had never stolen the money from my mom. Would my life have been any better? At this point I have serious doubts about that. I just can't seem to do anything to make my life better or have others take any notice of me.

Well, if I don't stop now, you will be so bored that you may wish you had never met me. One thing more. For a short time, my life really was interesting, and people wanted to know me. But, here I am -- back where I started, and you have just wasted your time listening to a man babble on and on.

One last thing. As I reviewed my story, I began to wonder if all this happened because of our, my wickedness. I chose to do things my way and did not find out if there was a correct way to live. Maybe that is why, when my story is told, that people don't read it. They don't really want to see what happens, when someone decides to do things their way, instead of God's way.

Syncretism

Are there people who believe they can do whatever they want, in the process of getting ahead? Do some people really believe they can serve God in any way they want, without consequences? There is a popular song, which boasts that nothing else matters, as long as "I did it my way." Is this true?

Goliath – Contempt

Life was not easy for me growing up. At first, the kids made fun of me because of my size, and it was hard to find someone to play with me. The kids my age were afraid of me and said it was no fun, because they could never win in most of the games, unless it involved tag. I couldn't move as fast as they could, which really frustrated me. The kids my size were many years older than I was, and while I was as big and strong as they were, I struggled to understand them.

Even adults treated me differently. Because of my size and strength, my parents decided I had to start helping with chores, while other kids my age were still free to play. The other adults were impressed with how big I was, but at the same time were afraid to let their children play with me, fearing I might hurt them. I had a few friends; a gang, and we took what we wanted. I was a bully, a really big one, who no one dared to challenge, not even their parents.

It was not until I was 18 or 19 that I found a place to fit in, and those around me were happy to have me with them. That is when I joined the Philistine army and learned how to fight. By that time, I was already over 8 feet tall and strong. The army trainers saw my potential and invested a lot of time in my training. By the time I was 25, I was over 9 feet tall and a powerful man. I could defeat several people at a time in practice and on the battlefield. It was not long before the enemy learned that I was not just big; I was smart and powerful.

In all the contests, friendly and on the battlefield, I was always victorious. And with that reputation, I began to receive more and more respect, as well as gifts and honors. When we won a battle, I was given the best prizes from the booty, after the

king and the generals. Year after year my fame and wealth grew. Because I had never been defeated, both my generals and I began to believe that I was invincible. This led them to hatch a plan that could save the lives of many in our army.

When two armies met, our leaders would challenge the other army to send out their greatest warrior to face me. At first, many accepted the challenge. They too hoped to avoid loss of life among their men and believed that maybe their great warrior could defeat me. I always won, though. Even if the other army decided to fight and not honor our agreement, they became so demoralized from watching me crush their hero, that they lost their desire to fight and were easily defeated.

My fame and wealth continued to increase, so that when the challenge was issued many chose to surrender instead of risking certain defeat. Everyone wanted to be my friend; those who had laughed at me, and those who had avoided me. I was Goliath, the undefeated warrior of the most powerful army in the region. I got whatever I wanted. It was a bully's paradise.

For years we dominated the region, including the Israelites. There was a time, though, when we feared them. That was when their great warrior, Samson, was alive. The stories I have heard about his strength are incredible, almost unbelievable. Most likely they are not even true and have become inflated over the years. Fear will do that to people. Often people have compared me to him and have said they wished I had been alive back then. I could have stopped Samson. I do wish I could have met him. It would have been an interesting encounter. I am sure I would have beaten him and could have asked for anything I wanted. Maybe I could have even become king.

That is what should happen. They should make me king instead of the one who is leading us. I take all of the risk, and he gets all the honor. I do all the work, and he lives a life of ease. I win the battle, and they praise his wisdom. He is a farce. After I defeat Israel's hero, that is what I am going to do; take over!

To do that I must deal with a man called Saul. He is the tallest man I have seen in a long time. He is also the king of those same people as Samson was. They have been a thorn in our side for years. First it was Joshua, then Samson, and then one time we successfully captured the house of their god, the ark as they called it. Each time we have struggled and not been able to get rid of them or completely dominate them. This time will be different. We have issued the challenge, but this great warrior king of theirs refuses to come out and accept the challenge, the coward. This has been going on day after day. We are getting tired and restless. If something doesn't change, I am just going to attack them and force the issue. Then I am going to replace our king. No one can stop me.

As I was thinking about this, I heard some of our soldiers talking. The rumor was that someone had told the Israelite king he was willing to fight me. I came out of my tent and began to hear other stories. He was a boy, who claimed he had killed a lion and a bear. If this were true that would be pretty impressive. It reminded me of the things I did when I was young. I thought maybe they had found someone my size to fight.

Good, I was tired of waiting. I wanted to fight and display my strength. I wanted the praise and fear of everyone. And after the battle, I was going to make them all pay and give me everything I wanted.

Then, I saw the person they were talking about. This guy was barely half my height, and he was skinny. This was disgraceful. How dare they send a child to fight me, the great and mighty Goliath! How could my own people even consider agreeing to this? That made me even angrier. It was an insult beyond measure!

I was going to make short work of this kid and take out my anger and shame on both leaders. As soon as the boy was dead, I would kill Saul for insulting me, and then my king for allowing them to insult me. So, I entered the battlefield with only one thought on my mind: to wipe this boy off the face of the earth. I started by throwing my spear and then my lance at him. Instead of being afraid, he just stood there calmly watching me and deftly stepping to the side to let them fly by, as if they were simply blades of grass that couldn't hurt him.

I screamed in frustration. He answered in a clear voice, declaring that I had insulted his God, and for that I would die today. I began to advance. He just stood there waiting. I took another step and began to raise my sword. Then I realized he didn't have any armor or a sword, just a sling. This was going to be easy. As I took another step, he took out his sling and placed a stone in it. My fury knew no bounds. No armor, no sword...only a sling...a toy people used to scare away birds in the field!

I began to take another step and could visualize what would happen to his body, once I got near enough to swing. I would split him from head to.....!

Bullying - What skill or ability do you use to dominate others? What are you hoping to gain, by trying to dominate them and control your own life? Even if you accomplish your goal, what might you lose in the process?

Nabal – Surly

I am really smart. My parents didn't realize how smart until I was old enough to help with the farm and herds. At first, they didn't listen to me. They just couldn't see what I could see or understand what I was telling them. Finally, they let me have a small flock, and soon my small flock became bigger than theirs, and healthier, too. That is when they decided I was as smart as I knew I was. Yes, I told them so. My attitude, my ego and pride frustrated them and made them resistant to taking the next step.

But finally, they just couldn't resist the possibility of getting wealthy and becoming a respected family in the community. Yes, people still think that you are not important if you are not wealthy. When I took over, their flocks and farming began to produce like mine, and they did become what they hoped might happen as their wealth grew.

The only thing that they struggled with, was my attitude. As long as they did what I said, and didn't question me, my behavior and ego were tolerable. But when they challenged me and asked me to explain, I became truly intolerable. I would belittle them, and shout at them, or just ignore them. I think the ignoring was the most frustrating for my parents.

In the business world, I was praised for my sharp wit, ability to negotiate, pleasant manner, and wise actions. That was the side of me that the world saw. However, they did not see how I treated my workers and family. In relation to that, we need to be clear about one thing: I never abused anyone physically. I only made them cower in fear with my ability to take them apart and expose their weaknesses for others to see. That is real power. If you can control by the power of your words, then people will do what you want.

By the time I was old enough to marry, I had earned a great reputation for my astuteness in business. Actually, I was able to apply this ability to everything I did, and if I seemed a bit rude and short with people, they let it pass because of the benefits they could see in my words and recommendations. I applied these same abilities to my selection of a wife. Yes, I chose my own wife... what could my parents say or do about it? They didn't want to risk their own benefits by meddling in my world.

So, I began my search for the wife. The truth is, I was looking for a marketable commodity to use to advance my position in the community. The term people use in some countries is "eye candy." Someone beautiful and sufficiently smart so as not to embarrass me in public. This was the challenge. So many pretty girls were just that, pretty girls. They could not handle much beyond fulfilling the normal duties of a woman. But nothing was normal around me. I didn't want normal. I wanted more, and so my wife had to have some measure of intelligence to be able to do what I required.

My search for a woman of intelligence was the greatest challenge. It is amazing how few of the women who are truly intelligent, are also not as attractive as I would like. As you can see, my search quickly limited my options. There was one other quality that I searched for...a woman who knew her place in the world. A woman smart enough to understand me and capable of doing what I wanted, without being a challenge to my authority.

I finally found the girl. Her name was Abigail. She came from a well-established family, and she was clearly intelligent. She could answer my questions with no hesitation, and her answers revealed a clear and organized mind that could run

my home. Besides that, she was definitely “eye candy,” someone I could show off.

We were married, and I soon learned she had another great talent. She could smooth over my relations with others. I have a low tolerance for mismanagement and failure to carry out my directions. I would rip a person apart verbally and leave them devastated. She had the ability to get them back to work and to improve so that they became less of a target for my surly, grouchy attitude. That made me happy, and because she was good at running the house and keeping the workers happy, I generally treated her well.

My plans were going well. Life was great, and the sheep-shearing looked like it would give us more wool than ever to market and increase my fortunes. I was so happy that I began drinking and celebrating. That was a dangerous thing to do, because I could be easily offended, prone to explode at anyone who dared to upset me. And that day, everything and everyone seemed to make me madder than ever. While I was celebrating my good fortunes, a group of men, obviously marauders, arrived and had the audacity to ask me to provide some food for the band of people who were following David.

This made me mad, first, because they dared to ask me to provide anything for them and this man, David, who was being hunted by the king. Secondly, and even more infuriating, was the fact that my workers dared to tell me it was a good idea to do this. They even suggested that our good fortune was not because of my astuteness, but because this group had protected us from losing any sheep that year! When I heard this, I immediately exploded and went on the attack. I made sure this group knew, in no uncertain terms, that they were not welcome, they deserved nothing from me, and they

should hide their heads in shame for even thinking about seeking help from law-abiding citizens, like me, for such criminals and traitors.

Well, they stood there in shock. I was triumphant and glared at them one more time, daring them to give me a reason to vent the rest of my thoughts and further humiliate them. They wisely said nothing, however, and left. It was at that point that my mind became foggy, and I fell into a very satisfied sleep.

Once I was asleep, I learned later that my workers immediately went to my wife to explain what had just happened. They knew about David and that he was a fearsome warrior. They had heard the stories of how he had killed Goliath and led the armies in victory after victory. They also knew that this man could be truly dangerous if given a good reason to attack. They had been extremely relieved when David and his men decided to set up their camp nearby, and had assured them that they need not worry about anyone trying to steal from my flocks as they watched. My workers also told my wife what I had done and how shamefully I had acted towards these men.

She saw the danger in the situation at hand and moved quickly. She knew that if this David felt insulted by what had happened, we might not survive until the next day. She then gathered up a gift of food, hoping it would be sufficient to appease David and avoid being attacked or possibly killed. Her plan worked beautifully, and David's anger was abated. He decided to leave the matter to God, and with those words, he led his men, numbering 400, back home with their ample gift in hand.

When I was finally sober, Abigail decided I needed to understand the seriousness of what I had done, how David had

responded, and what she had done to avert my death, as well as the possible death of everyone who worked for me. For the first time in my life, I knew real fear. I had not won this time. In fact, I had lost, and were it not for my wife's intervention, I would be dead. Even more, once everyone knew how stupid I had been, they would no longer fear me, and would probably laugh at me. There was one more thing. My wife, my incredibly beautiful wife, had revealed my secret name, a name that meant "fool," to this man, David. She also revealed her true opinion of me. She called me wicked, and for the first time in my life, I knew the truth about all my bullying and disgraceful treatment of others. The fear of what had happened, what could have happened, and what I now faced, made my heart beat so fast that my head exploded in pain.

Worker - Nabal died 10 days later from what appears to have been a massive stroke.

Witch of Endor – Sorcery

Life was great, until Samuel came along and began to serve as judge.

Before that, the Philistines had control of the land, and they all wanted to know something about the spirit world and what their god Dagon wanted them to do. They wanted love potions, curses, and insight into the future, all the things they believed the spirit world could give them. And I was pretty good at my job, with a better than 50 % success rate. Just enough, so that I could prove to be better than consulting by tossing a coin or using lots.

It is quite a head rush to have spirits respond and tell you, and those who consult you, their deepest secrets. That is one area about which they are very accurate. When that happens, people get really terrified, and you can raise your price, no questions asked. It doesn't matter if what you have to say about the future comes true or not. The fact that you might be able to reveal a deep hidden secret, or things a consultant shouldn't know, is enough to convince them to believe whatever you say.

I sometimes think that what I tell them is self-fulfilling. They convince themselves that the information is right and then do everything possible to make it happen. Even when it is something negative that will damage their life or even be destructive. When it happens, they return and convince others to come. It is amazing the control people will let you have over their lives and thoughts. Sometimes I just make up the answer. It doesn't matter, because they have no idea if I did or didn't actually get a message. But I do hear from spirits often enough to make me careful to not go too far. I did once, and the spirits

make me know they were not happy. Not going to let that happen again.

Then Samuel showed up, and more and more people became fearful of consulting me. He was teaching them that God was in control, not the spirits or gods. One by one, my compatriots began to flee the country, heading for Moab or the territory of the Philistines. A fair number of us stayed, hoping that the Israelites would once again abandon their god, and business would boom. It always did when that happened. At least, that's what my parents and grandparents had told me.

Then the worst thing happened. Samuel appointed a king who organized an army and made it a law that every witch or warlock, (a male witch), was to be killed on sight. That created a mass exodus until I think I am the only one left.

Still, many would come to me in secret to enquire about many things. I did a great job of hiding the fact I was a witch and made sure no one could see me come or go, nor see my face. I had some great disguises, and I could get to the meeting place easily without being seen.

When David began to serve in the army, I decided it would be wise to suspend my activities for a while. I soon recognized that David could be even more dangerous, and he seemed to have access to information that eluded me. Based on what I was hearing, he was quick to consult the prophets of God and took time to pray to his god. He never seemed to make a mistake. Even when Saul became displeased with him and tried to kill him, he escaped. He managed to elude everyone for years. So, I concluded that it had been a good decision to suspend my activity as a witch and wait things out.

Finally, things began to look better, but I was still wary. There were still a few people who knew about my abilities, but they too were being careful. Then one day, a gentleman dressed in rags arrived, accompanied by a few others. They asked me to consult a specific spirit but would not tell me who. Then they said not to worry, because they would make sure nothing would happen to me. However, I was still skeptical, because there was really only one person who could protect me from the edict of Saul, and that would be Saul himself

They said that if I were really a witch, able to contact the world of spirits, I would succeed. Every one of them believed the spirit would come. This made me extremely frightened. I knew from experience that this could be a dangerous situation. That meant they would not accept just any message, but only one clearly from that source. Just to be safe, I set my price higher than I had ever done before. They didn't hesitate and agreed.

All this intensified my suspicions. So, I looked closer at the man dressed in rags and realized that I was in serious trouble. This was not just any man, or any leader. It was Saul! He saw the terror on my face and spoke softly, saying he would not allow anything to happen to me. What could I say? I was now under the protection of the very man who had established the law to kill all witches.

So, I began my preparation. I had hardly started, when a form appeared. Not the normal spirits. This was the man, Samuel, who had started all my problems and restricted my activity. My fear was so great, I fell in a heap, trembling fearfully. Samuel was not happy. He was angry, with the type of anger for which one would pay dearly for causing. Saul and his men

amazingly managed to stay on their feet, but their faces were ashen in color, and they appeared like walking dead men.

Samuel's voice was terrifying when he asked why he had been disturbed in this manner. Saul struggled to speak and finally was able only to whisper his question. He wanted to know what would happen in the battle the next day. Samuel was not reassuring. If anything, his words were filled with doom and tragedy. Nothing had changed since he had last seen Saul years ago, when he had told him the kingdom would be ripped from his hands, and that nothing and no one would be left to take his place as king. That last word was the most chilling.

Saul collapsed to the ground with the realization that his sons would die as well. The terror in his eyes, froze him to the ground. For the longest time he would not, could not move. Finally, we got him to raise up from his place on the ground. For a long while, he sat and simply refused to eat. Finally his men and I convinced him he must eat something to regain his strength, so I made them some porridge.

After a very long time, they finally left. I told them to keep their money. I was beyond frightened at what could happen to me, if I accepted that money. My dread at what could happen to me, if I were even to touch that money, was so intense that I decided I could no longer be a witch. I could not risk having happen to me what was about to happen to Saul for having disregarded the words and law of this god. As soon as they left, I packed up a few things and left. I was not coming back and would find someplace to go where I could live in peace, far from this God.

I finally understood that the promise of power, riches, and fame through practicing sorcery, was a harmful lie. It was not enough to protect me from punishment by the true God. When

anyone asks me about my experience, I tell them in no uncertain terms, that it is a deceptive path, which will result in great loss, from which money, fame, and power cannot protect you.

Sorcery - Many people carry objects to increase their level of luck or to protect them from danger. Is this any different from consulting a witch or palm reader, reading your horoscope, or many other practices people use to gain access to information and to control their life and future?

Shimei – Disloyalty

I am a Benjamite, and I am proud of my heritage. We are the descendants of the youngest son of Jacob. He loved this son more than any other. It was only right that the first king should come from our tribe. While it is true that we are the smallest tribe, that is not important. Our hearts are big, and we are fiercely loyal to our own.

We will defend to the death every member of our tribe. It almost destroyed us once when we defended one of our towns, who had allowed the murder of a young concubine. Yes, they were wrong and needed to be punished, but never by anyone from another tribe. We fought until there were only a few hundred of us left. Finally, the others came to their senses and stopped hunting us and became convicted of the wrong they had done. In order to correct the near destruction of our tribe, they found wives for all the young single men left among us.

Just to show how resilient we are and how valuable we are as a tribe, God chose the first king, Saul, from among our tribe. It was a proud day, and we held a place of power and respect among everyone, until David showed up.

He was nothing special; not like Saul, who was tall, handsome, and well built. The kind of person everyone would follow. David, yeah he was handsome, in a rugged way, but he was young, short, and even his father didn't place much value in him. He was kept at home to tend the sheep, while the others followed Saul.

Then this kid did the miraculous. He killed Goliath. Through that feat he gained instant popularity. Saul, a wise man, saw this, and made him captain of a division of the army. Because of the fearlessness of David, his division became a force to be reckoned with. They risked more and won more than anyone

else. It was clear that his single-minded confidence in God had a powerful effect on his soldiers.

That would have been great, but eventually no one wanted to fight unless David was present. Saul tried to control this surge in power and popularity by giving him impossible tasks, but David never failed. Even more, people forgot who their ruler was and began to shower increasingly more praise on this usurper. Even Saul's son Jonathan was affected. I couldn't believe my ears when I learned that he had helped David escape and willingly gave up his claim to succeed his father as king.

Many of us were furious with Jonathan's action and used every opportunity we could find to help Saul rid himself of David. We were there to help in the hunt. David was a wary prey, and even when we thought we had him trapped, he would do something to discourage Saul from continuing the pursuit. Twice, David could have killed Saul but didn't. The second time Saul was whipped, and we became lost and discouraged. If our great Saul gave up, then what was left for us?

To cheer us up Saul decided to attack the Gibeonites. It was an easy battle. They were unarmed and believed in the protection of the promise given them by Joshua: that they could live among us in safety. It was a slaughter. Such a victory would normally have resulted in celebration. Not this time, though. How can you celebrate having defeated an unarmed enemy? As a result, the next time we went into battle we were so disheartened that we had no strength to fight. We lost control of the battle, the enemy overran our position, and they killed Saul and his sons.

Promptly, Judah proclaimed David king. Not everyone supported this decision, and a large number of us joined Ishbosheth, another son of Saul, and crowned him king. We might have won, too, but the fool offended Abner, who convinced enough of our army to abandon Ishbosheth and follow David. Enough left that we had no choice but to surrender and proclaim David king. Then Joab, using deceit, murdered Abner and others. How can people follow David, when his generals behave so foully? But David mourned for Abner, and it became clear that Joab had acted without David's consent. That helped to win the rest of the people over, and the kingdom became united under David as king.

After a number of years, there was a serious drought. The prophet said God was punishing us for Saul's decision to attack the Gibeonites in defiance of the promise of safety. The word came down that David had talked to the Gibeonites, who promised David if he were to give them seven of Saul's descendants to execute, then they would be appeased. I heard that the prophet, Nathan, who was a friend of David, told him that this was acceptable to God and would end the drought. In my opinion, though, it was just another act of subterfuge, like that of Joab to make sure there would be no survivor from Saul's family to lay claim to the throne of Israel.

So many of us had become bitter over these things. We had lost all our privileges and any hope of having them restored. So, when we heard that David's son Absalom was attempting to overthrow his father and wanted him dead, we of course were right there to help him. If we could not have a member of the family of Saul as king, then we would make sure David did not rule. We didn't care that many prophets had proclaimed that God had chosen David... from the time of

Samuel up to Nathan. We were convinced that David had usurped our right to have a member of our tribe on the throne.

While others were signing up to fight with Absalom, I ran ahead and found a safe place where I could watch and enjoy shouting curses on David. I heard them tell David he should let them kill me for my words, but I was determined to be long gone before they could reach me. Before I left, though, I also heard David state that he had had enough of their deceit and subterfuge. He ordered them to leave me alone, just in case God had sent me as some form of punishment. Oh, that made me even more furious and vile! I shouted louder and threw stones and dirt down from my perch. I wickedly enjoyed watching them slink around trying to avoid both my words and the stones and dirt.

Unfortunately, it all came to nothing. David defeated Absalom decisively. David was stronger than ever. So, I did what any smart person would do. I organized a group and met David and his army to help them cross the river back into the land of Judah. My words were as sweet then as they had been vile before. I bowed, I crawled, begging his forgiveness. I don't think he was quite ready to forgive me until Joab or one of his brothers declared I should be executed for what I had done. David's reaction was to pardon me, just to spite them for all the problems they had caused him. I think he was tired of their continual meddling in his affairs, which had just created more headaches for him.

Having David pardon me convinced everyone with me to pledge their undying loyalty once again to David. Maybe he really was the one God had chosen, because his response was perfect, and they became a key group in reestablishing David on his throne. Me, I was amazed that any Benjamite would, or

even could, accept David as king. But I was smart enough to keep my head down and avoid anything that would change David's mind.

It was only when Solomon became king, that I found out that all of my begging, crying, and deceit had not really worked. David had known exactly what I was made of and what I would try to do if the opportunity ever arose. One day, Solomon called me in and told me in no uncertain terms that I was a blemish and pariah on the honor of Israel. Still, he vowed to uphold the promise his father had made to me, as long as I agreed to never, ever leave Jerusalem. His expression conveyed all I needed to know, so I quickly agreed.

Life went on peacefully enough, but I longed to return home. One day a message came, requesting my presence urgently. I hoped that enough time had passed so that Solomon would not pay attention to whether or not I was keeping my promise, so I left. Oh, oh! Solomon did not forget! I can see them coming right now down the road to my village! Running is not an option. I am just too old now. I will have to try one more time to obscure things so I can escape. Unfortunately, I doubt it will work this time. Solomon has shown that no one can fool him.

My years of duplicity and retaliation for the perceived slight against my tribe have caught up with me. I finally see how my pride and selfishness have brought me to this moment, and the reality is that everyone around me has also suffered for my sin.

Sheba – Rebellion

I am an opportunist. I love to take advantage of peoples struggles to get ahead and get what I want. It doesn't matter what happens to them, as long as I get ahead.

I will even stir up trouble at times. I am often successful in this process. I have learned to watch for the signs of discontent and division. Then I begin a gossip campaign. You have to be very careful with this process. It needs to contain enough truth, so people will not see the lie contained in it. If you do this effectively, it won't matter how much the person who is the object of your campaign defends himself or herself against the lie, no one will believe them.

To be effective involves listening carefully for a person's expressions of discontent and encouragement to believe it is not their fault. It is someone else's fault. It is always someone else's fault. The next step is to get them to question why that person is allowing the problem to continue... to ask why they aren't fixing the problem. While you are doing this, make sure nobody realizes what you are doing or can link you to anything that is happening.

In this way, when the time is right, and the lie is well established, you quietly slip out of the picture and tell the person or people who are the object of this gossip what other people are saying about them. Carefully done, you then switch back and forth, fueling the situation from both sides until you can sit back and watch things run out of control. All the while you are doing this, you need to make sure people see you as their benefactor, their friend. When it all falls apart, then you can step in and take over.

Usually the problem is not anything big. The object is to find something, exploit it, and then move on. The only concern is

that if you do exploit too many people in one place, they may finally figure out that you are a troublemaker, and they won't want you around. At the same time, if you are really good at this, you can find yourself in a real position to gain power and opportunities to do what you really want.

I had been slowly working my way into the upper levels of leadership in Israel. I was doing well and building a power base in Saul's army. It was not too difficult as a Benjamite, because I had ready access to the court and did everything I could to make sure I was around when critical decisions were being made. I was especially involved in encouraging Saul to make sure David was kept at a distance.

I very carefully avoided David but did everything I could to make it look like David was the one avoiding me. Step by step, my role and influence grew. When Saul was killed along with his sons, I thought that maybe all my planning had fallen apart. But I decided to keep working at my plan, hoping that an opportunity might present itself. The one thing I had to be careful about was to keep out of David's radar. He was far too perceptive regarding how people could create subterfuge and dissension.

It was indeed a challenge, but finally my opportunity arrived. I had had to wait a long time. When it finally came, it all happened so fast. Absalom had been defeated, and David was returning to Jerusalem. A fight broke out over who should have the right to bring him back into Jerusalem. The dissension was growing, and David was so distracted and caught up in his sorrow that he did not see what was happening and did not respond as he usually did to calm his people. He was very astute as to how to resolve such conflicts and restore unity.

I stepped up and shouted that we had no part in David. I called all those who were disgruntled to leave with me, and, just like that, I had leaders from 10 tribes ready to follow me. I quickly left the place before David could react and called everyone to follow me. When I heard that David had assigned Amasa the task of capturing me, I felt confident I would have time to organize before David's men could gather. Amasa was a good general, but he was not good at motivating people. So, I traveled throughout the land telling my story and began to gather followers. Everything was going well until we heard that Joab had been told to take over my pursuit and bring me in. In order to solidify his control over the pursuit, he slyly killed Amasa.

While I had little to fear from Amasa, Joab was a different matter. That man was crazy. I mean, when he led the army into battle, he was super-focused, and nothing could stand in his way. He was among the 30 greatest warriors of David's army. When the word spread that Joab was in charge of my pursuit, I began to lose momentum. I needed to flee, but I had little hope of escape.

I finally found a secure place where I thought I could hide and regroup, but Joab discovered where I was and promptly began to destroy the fort where I was hiding. As the wall was beginning to crumble, a woman called out to Joab and asked why he was attacking them. They were a peaceful town, and she did not understand what was happening. He answered that he was going to destroy them, because they were harboring my men and me, and that I was leading a revolt against David. He assured her that if they were to hand me over, then all would be well.

I reasoned to myself, that if they do hand me over, then maybe I can worm my way out of things like Shimei had done when he apologized to David for cursing him. Unfortunately for me, however, that was not to be. All my scheming backfired that day, and I literally lost my head. They cut it off and threw it out over the wall. When Joab saw my head, he recalled his men and immediately left the town in peace.

That is one of the great dangers of being a troublemaker. In the end, no one trusts you, and then they realize the best way to resolve their problems is just to get rid of you...the one who has been feeding them with lies and deception. When that happens, it is over. If you are fortunate, you might escape with minimal harm, maybe a beating. Not today, though. They made sure I would never trouble anyone ever again.

Jeroboam – Syncretism

I am by nature a troublemaker. I love challenging authority and fighting for the rights of others. At first it was little things, like fighting for more privileges for my siblings and me. My parents found it interesting and amusing. In time they gave in, not so much because I had won my debate, but because we were older. I think I was given a little more responsibility as well, but I am not sure you would call that having more privileges, yet it made me feel special, like I had gained a victory.

As time passed, I found other things to champion. Better working conditions for our workers. I won that one as well. My parents allowed me to make the changes, and my workers respected me for caring about them. As a result, they worked better and harder.

Soon after that, many around me began complaining about the government taxes and conscription program. Solomon, in his great wisdom, had decided to buy more horses and needed more stables. He also decided that many of his wives needed special buildings, so they could worship their gods. He had married many of them as a result of treaties with a number of countries. This resulted in more taxes and conscription of workers, so he and his family could live a life of ease.

Don't get me wrong. We were all doing well and benefited in many ways from the taxes, and those who were conscripted were well-cared-for and paid well. I made sure of that, because I had been hired by Solomon to manage the labor force. It wasn't long before I became frustrated by what I saw. The conscription and taxes were getting to be too much and conflicted with a number of rules that Moses and Samuel had given for kings to follow.

One day, while leaving Jerusalem, Ahijah the prophet met me. He took his new cloak, tore it into 12 pieces and gave me ten of them. As he did so, he told me that God had decided to divide the kingdom, and I was to become ruler over ten of the tribes. He also told me that if I diligently obeyed God's laws, I would be the first of a dynasty and would rule over all my heart desired.

So, I put my skills to work and began to organize peaceful protests and sent petitions to the king regarding his disregard for the rules and the excessive taxes. More and more people began to join the movement, which got Solomon's attention. Unfortunately, instead of negotiating like others had done in the past, he declared me an outlaw, a traitor, and put up a reward for my capture.

Of necessity, I fled the country and my followers wisely became silent, and the movement went underground. That is what we had hoped would happen, so we continued to plan covertly. Then I heard that Solomon had died, and his son Rehoboam had been crowned king.

I knew Rehoboam. He was not a wise man and was more interested in living a life of ease than in ruling a kingdom. I also knew he was not highly regarded by the people or leaders. I quickly returned to Jerusalem, organized my group and we gathered with many others to present a petition to the new king.

It was perfect. If he listened, life would improve for everyone. If he did not, and I knew he wouldn't, then it might be possible to win the hearts of the leaders of the tribes and launch a rebellion.

As expected, he refused to listen to the wise counsel of his elders and insisted on levying even heavier taxes and conscripting more people. The people rebelled and when they realized that I was there with them, the leaders of the ten tribes assembled and proclaimed me their king. We then hurriedly left Jerusalem and fortified Shechem. God had promised me, through the prophet Alijah, that Rehoboam would not attack me, and he did not. That meant there was time to consolidate the new kingdom and organize everything necessary for the smooth operation of its governing.

While we were in the process of reorganizing, I began to see something that I expected might happen, and which I had been discussing with my counselors. The people of the northern kingdom continued to travel to Jerusalem to deliver their sacrifices and celebrate the feasts. I also noticed that the Levites were leaving and moving to the new southern kingdom, Judah. If they continued to do so they might decide to reunite with Judah and perhaps kill me as a traitor.

We quickly put our plan into motion. We had been constructing two golden calves, based on the one Aaron had built in the desert to represent God when Moses had disappeared. We brought them out and placed one in Dan and the other in Bethel. As we had hoped, the people were happy to make the shorter trip to worship the golden calves. I had shrines built in convenient high places and appointed priests from those interested in being a priest. To complete the plan, I established an annual festival to replace the one being held in Jerusalem.

Everything was going as planned. I had successfully led the rebellion, established a new kingdom, and was king over Israel. I had also put in place my alternate plan to keep the

people from traveling to Jerusalem and the temple, by providing places of worship and idols of gold, something visible to worship. With all that in place, I was just beginning the first celebration of the new festival to set everything in motion, when a man of God coming from Judah cried out against me, the altar, and the calves.

He declared that I had made a serious mistake by creating the golden calves and setting up a false altar for sacrificing to them, instead of God. He declared that a future king of Judah, who he named, would come and sacrifice on this altar all the false priests appointed by me and my successors. He then declared that, as a sign to confirm what he said would come true, the altar stone would split in half and the ashes would pour out...a serious indication that his word was true, and this place would be cursed by God.

In anger, and to demonstrate my power, I stretched out my hand pointing at the prophet and shouting out to the people to seize him. The moment I stretched out my hand it shriveled up and became frozen in place! In response to my scream, the altar then split in half. Instead of finishing my command to seize and kill him, I pleaded with the prophet to intercede with God and to heal me. He heard my cry and prayed, and my hand was restored. In gratitude, I offered him gifts and invited him to my home to have something to eat. However, he refused to accept either offer, which I regarded as a public insult.

So I went home, refused to heed the warning and continued to build shrines and appoint priests. But the kingdom I had hoped to establish and enjoy was not to be. Rehoboam was released from the former instruction not to attack us, and so there was constant war. When my son became ill, I sent my wife to Ahijah, the prophet who had told me I would become king of

Israel. His words, however, were harsh and fearful. He told her that, as soon as she entered the city, the child would die, and he did. He also told her that all of the males of my family would one day be destroyed.

Again, instead of heeding the prophet's warning, I continued to believe I knew the best way to rule the people and keep them loyal to me and their new kingdom. I built more shrines and appointed more priests. The worship strayed farther and farther from the God I had been taught about, who had given me this kingdom. It didn't seem important, because I saw how the people relished the new forms of worship I'd established and how they took pleasure in the sins that were part of this new worship.

Unfortunately, I learned too late that you don't negotiate with God. As a result, my family would be destroyed as part of a coup.

Do you ever try to negotiate with God to get what you want? Do you ever think that you know a better way to get things done than God's way?

Jezebel – Malevolent

My husband is a wimp, but he is a dangerous wimp. He is feared, especially when he doesn't get what he wants. I think that is part of the reason he married me. Let me explain. I worship Baal. My god gives us what we want as long as we fulfill our obligations. The obligations are easy to understand and follow. It involves sacrifices and worship. If we do that, then we are free to do what we want without consequences. But the God of Israel and his prophets are different. Their rules cover every aspect of life. Failure in any, means being judged guilty and punished. The rules are so strict, compared to those of my god Baal, that you feel choked.

So, Ahab, hoping to find a god that he could serve and still enjoy his life, married me. I was excited. I would be married to a wealthy and powerful man and be able to teach him and his people to worship my god. When needed, I would use my position and his power to be sure I got what I wanted. All was going well until Elijah showed up and condemned my husband for worshiping my god and then proclaimed that there would be a drought until his God decided otherwise. The drought began, and Ahab became furious. I used that fury to try to destroy all of the prophets of the God of Elijah. I took all their property to fund my lifestyle, feed all the prophets of Baal and Asherah, and to search for Elijah. There was a great reward for anyone who could tell us where to find him.

Three years passed, and life became difficult. Then we got a message from Obadiah, the king's steward, that Elijah had met him on the road and given him a message. If Ahab wanted to meet him, he was to come to Mt Ebal and bring all 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah, as well as the people of Israel, for a competition to reveal which god was the true god and

had real power. Unfortunately, I was returning from a visit to my parents, so I didn't arrive until after it was all over.

The challenge was to prepare a sacrifice, and each would call on their god to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. My prophets failed. But it was an unfair test. It was far from the temple of Baal and without proper preparation. Elijah had the advantage and swayed the people. It was easy, because they wanted someone to blame for the drought. As a result, he led them in killing all 850 of our prophets. I was furious when I heard and swore to kill Elijah, if I ever caught him. I was not surprised when I heard that he had fled the country.

When he finally returned, I tried my best to destroy him, but he always managed to escape or thwart my attempts to kill him, somehow.

It was not long after that, something happened that would bring about my destruction. Remember, I told you I was married to a wimp. I think he was part of the reason why I could not succeed in destroying Elijah. Ahab was afraid of the man.

I had been waiting for an opportunity to sway my husband's thinking and regain my influence over him. Finally, the day came. Ahab had seen the vineyard of Naboth and wanted it. I couldn't believe my ears when I heard that the man refused to sell his land or accept something better, simply because it was his portion of their tribal inheritance. I will never understand this people and the control the land has on them, even after years of suffering because of disobeying their god. You would think they would finally see the light and focus on getting what they want, like I do.

As a result, Ahab became despondent and depressed. I saw my chance. If I could get that vineyard and give it to Ahab, then maybe I could change his attitude towards Elijah and finally be rid of the man.

I succeeded. I used Naboth's own silly belief in God to destroy him. I paid witnesses to testify that he had cursed this god. It didn't matter that, for the most part, they didn't even obey the laws. This one was enough, though, because breaking this one carried the death penalty, death by stoning. With the man's death, I took possession of the land and gave it to my husband. He was ecstatic and promptly went to the vineyard to examine it and start making plans. I was about to take the next step, when that man Elijah showed up and prophesied our destruction for the murder of the prior owner. Ahab, wimp that he is, buckled. He refused to listen to my side of the story and begged for mercy.

Elijah heard his pleas and decided that Ahab was sincere, so he pardoned him. Then he turned on me and declared that my death would be a horrible one ...one of great disgrace and shame. His words were fierce enough to turn the stomach of even a strong man, but I was not about to give him the satisfaction of seeing me squirm and beg. I convinced myself that I was not afraid and laughed at him.

At that moment, I decided I would make it my destiny to destroy everything I could, related to his belief in his God. I began to prepare my daughter as a tool to carry out my plan to really hurt Elijah. Then I arranged for my daughter Athaliah to marry the son of Jehoshaphat.

My wimp of a husband was always trying to improve our relations with Judah. Having one less enemy to fight, and maybe the faith of Jehoshaphat in God, could benefit us, too.

That made it easy to suggest offering our daughter as a wife to the son of Jehoshaphat. What better way to unite our families and improve our relations? Ahab and Jehoshaphat agreed, and I was thrilled. That was phase one.

Once she was married that would allow me to introduce the worship of Baal into Judah. Athaliah loved the idea with its possibility of having power over a king and a nation like Judah. I had raised her well.

Unfortunately, I never got to see the results of our plan. When Ahab died in battle, that traitor Jehu killed all the members of our family, everyone, and then he had the gall to order my own servants to throw me out the window to my death. As Elijah had prophesied, the dogs ate my body before they finally came to bury me.

All my plans for Ahab and Israel had come to an abrupt and ghastly end. Only one thing remained, maybe my daughter could accomplish what I had failed to do...destroy the worship of the God of this accursed people.

Gehazi – Lying

In my world, there are only two possible careers that one can choose, if you want to survive the famines, droughts, and wars that have become all too common these days. You either need to be a part of the court of the king, or you need to belong to a group called the school of the prophets, founded by Elijah, and now led by Elisha. Only a few get that privilege. The one is by birth, the other is by a call from God.

Unfortunately, I am not a high-born person nor called as a prophet. That means there is only one way left to enjoy the benefits of either group. That is to become a servant to a key person. I had seen what had happened to the kings, and how they cowered before Elijah, and now Elisha. I had also heard many stories about Elisha, and how the school of the prophets benefited from his relationship to God.

So, I decided that I would seek out Elisha and offer my services. I am not sure why he accepted me, but he did, and I was happy. It gave me access to food and water, when others were struggling, and I got to be present to see first-hand some of the incredible miracles he performed.

The first time, was when a widow of a prophet in the group cried to Elisha. She told him that the creditors were about to take her sons to sell them to repay her husband's debt. Elisha asked her what she had in the house that she could sell. She said she only had a small pot of oil. He told her to gather all the jars she could find, then close the door, and begin to pour the oil into those jars.

She thought he was insane to tell her to do this, but because it was Elisha who had told her to do this, she did as he instructed, and the oil did not stop flowing until she had filled every jar she had gathered. She then sold the oil, was able to pay off the

debt, and had enough left over to live on comfortably. That was a lot of oil and on that day! I knew I had chosen the right career as servant to Elisha. If he could do that for a widow, then I had nothing to worry about in relation to finances and resources.

The next thing he did was to heal the Shunamite's son. She was a special lady, who always had a meal prepared when we passed through her community. In fact, she built a special room on her house, so he could have a place to rest when traveling in her area. She was childless, and as a gift, God gave her a son. Several years later, word came that the boy became sick and had died. Elisha gave me his rod and sent me off at a run to her house, with the instruction to lay the rod on the boy.

I did this, but nothing happened, so I ran back to Elisha to tell him nothing had happened. He immediately got up, ran to her house and prayed for the boy. Then he lay on top of the boy, prayed and laid on top of the boy again. The second time, the boy sneezed a number of times and came back to life. I stood there stunned and then realized I was doubly blessed. Not only had I chosen someone who could provide for my needs but could also protect me from disease and death. Life was good, and I was enjoying all the benefits of serving the most powerful man around.

I had little interest in his relationship to God. So, I did enough to please the man and stay on his good side. By doing so, I felt like I would always have what I needed and maybe more.

Then came Naaman with his camels and donkeys laden with great wealth. He was the general of our enemy, but he was a leper. He had heard from his wife's slave girl, an Israelite, that there was a person in our country who could cure him. When he showed up at the court of the king and made his request,

the king went into a tantrum and tore his robes, crying that Naaman's king was just trying to create a reason to attack, when he failed to cure the man.

Elisha heard about it and sent me to ask the king to send Naaman to him. As we traveled back, I observed the wealth and thought to myself how we are going to live like kings after Elisha healed him and accepted the gift he had brought. Only, it did not go as I had expected. Oh, Elisha healed the man, but he refused to take even one shekel in payment.

It was at that moment, I realized that I might not have chosen wisely. As I reviewed all the miracles of food and healing, I began to realize none of them were done to improve our lives, increase our wealth, or prevent troubles. They were all done to meet a specific need of the moment and often not a need of the school of prophets. So, I decided that I would use the opportunity to start providing for my own future...for the time when I would need to leave and serve myself.

I quickly followed Naaman and asked him for a reasonable payment. I told him the prophet needed a portion of his gift to care for some unexpected needs. It was a lie, yes, but I was not greedy in my request. I only asked for enough to care for my needs for several years to come. It took two of his men to carry it to my house. All went well, and it looked like my lies to Elisha and Naaman would succeed.

But that was not to be. My problem was that I only desired to serve the man Elisha, and I never desired to learn about or know the god he served. That error cost me dearly that day. While I had hidden my plans from Elisha, I had not realized that God would see my actions and inform Elisha. He exposed my greed and selfish preoccupation for myself. He spoke,

judged me, and announced my punishment: I became a leper, like the man I had deceived!

I thought my life was doomed. In order to survive, I joined a group of lepers and was there, when the group discovered an Aramean camp that had been abandoned, as a result of God's action to drive them away. I was there when we told the king about the riches and the food in that camp. The king saw me in the group, realized I had been Elisha's servant, and decided it would be to his benefit to keep me nearby. I might prove useful in understanding what was happening, and maybe he could glean from my knowledge of the school of the prophets and Elisha.

That was good thing, because not long after that the country experienced a seven-year famine. Many people fled the country at the risk of losing their land to those hunting for a place to provide for their needs. The Shunamite, whose son Elisha had raised to life, was one of those people. In fact, Elisha had told her to leave, but when the famine was over, she came back and discovered that indeed someone had squatted on her land and refused to leave. So she came to the court to plead her case.

That very day, I was in court, because the king wanted me to regale him with the exploits of Elisha. I saw her come in just as I finished the story of her son's healing. I pointed at her and said, "there is the woman." The king called her to the front and asked her why she had come. As soon as he heard her request, he ordered the land to be restored to her, plus all the income that had been earned from it, while she was gone.

So now, the king is pleased with me, and I have learned not to demand or seek more than I need. I am living comfortably these days, but I am an outcast and only have what I need for

each day. This is certainly not what I had hoped for. I made a serious mistake, when I chose not to know the God of Elisha and only used the situation to care for myself.

Athaliah – Murder

I am the daughter of my mother. I, like my mother, was given in marriage to confirm a treaty between two nations. I, like my mother, am fully committed to the worship of Baal, the god of our people of Zidon. I, like my mother, want all people to worship Baal and know the delights that come with this worship. I too, like her, want to destroy the worship of the god of the people of Israel/Judah. Its continued existence will negatively affect the freedom of our people to accept the worship of Baal.

My mother and I have had many conversations about how we could accomplish this. Especially in the days leading up to my wedding to Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat. We were especially encouraged in our planning, as we realized Jehoram was a weak person and could potentially be manipulated in the same way my mother had manipulated Ahab to replace the worship of the god of Israel and the worship of the calves with our worship of Baal.

The only blot on our plans has been that accursed man, Elijah. Every time we gained greater control, he appeared and raised havoc with all we were doing to establish our control over Israel and Judah and our goal of abolishing the worship of their god.

He predicted drought, and for three years we had such severe drought that our survival was made possible only by seeking out, killing, and appropriating all the properties of those who followed this god. We were gaining ground, but then he returned and made his accursed challenge. He used some kind of trickery to prevent our prophets from succeeding in calling down fire, and that same trickery to create the illusion of fire

that consumed his. This gave him enough influence to cause the crowd to submit to him and to kill all of our priests.

As proof of his trickery, the moment my mother threatened him, he fled. That should have been the end of him, but he came back, and we could find no way to rid ourselves of this vile man. My mother was a tower of strength for me and an incredible example of fortitude, even when he appeared and condemned her for the death of Naboth. How could he do such a thing? It is the right of a king to have what he wants. My father could have just taken the land. Instead, he was most generous in offering to trade or even to pay him, something unheard of where my mother's family lives.

I took her example and went farther. I manipulated my husband into believing his brothers were a threat to him, and he believed me and had them killed. He had become a follower of Baal through my influence and clearly saw the truth of what I told him. If they lived, one day they would assassinate him for abandoning their god.

Then came more interference, as a result of the man, Elijah. This time, his protégé Elisha sent a letter condemning the murder of the king's brothers, and all we were doing to convert Judah to the worship of Baal. I convinced him to ignore it, but somehow this man caused my husband to become ill and die horribly before my eyes. I became furious and was further driven to destroy the worship of this god, who constantly interfered in my plans and goals.

My opportunity to take things to the next level came when we (my son Amaziah and I) went to visit my brother, who was recovering from injuries in his battles with the Syrians. While we were there, Jehu arrived. Can we not escape the constant interference of those who fanatically follow this god? While I

waited in the city where we were staying, Jehoram and Amaziah went to meet Jehu, and he killed them. I quickly escaped back to Jerusalem.

Once there, I realized that I had the opportunity to do what my mother and I had planned. I could establish myself as the queen of Judah. To do this, though, I needed to kill my grandchildren. You would think this would have been hard, but I saw how they were being influenced against me by another despicable man, the priest Jehoida. To carry out my plans, they needed to die, and so I ordered my followers to carry this out, and I established myself as queen.

In all the mayhem and frenzy of carrying out my orders, they lost track of one grandson...a baby newly born, who my half-daughter managed to sneak away. She was quick and knew that, as powerful and fearless as my followers were, they would not enter the temple of that god. In their rush to carry out my orders, they did not see what she had in the bundle of clothing she carried. Once inside the temple, they ignored her and finished carrying out my orders.

Now I had accomplished more than we had ever dreamed possible. I was the absolute ruler and could replace the worship of their god with the worship of Baal. The only sad note was the message that arrived a few days later, of my mother's death. But, in that message I found encouragement: she had been defiant to the end.

That defiance gave me the strength to go forward. Step by step, I began to dismantle the worship of their god and replace it with that of Baal. I even managed to dismantle a section of the temple courts, in which to construct a worship site for Baal. It has been a constant battle though. That priest Jehoida is always causing me trouble. I should have him killed, but he

has an incredible amount of influence. I must be cunning like my mother was in her dealing with Naboth.

When the time is right, I will find a way to discredit him. That will be the turning point. If he is discredited in the eyes of the people, they will abandon their belief in their god, and I will have complete freedom to do whatever I want.

And that is exactly what I was doing. But, today it became clear that I have underestimated the power and influence of those who follow the god that Elijah, Elisha, and Jehoida serve. The people have watched and seen how, no matter what my mother and I have done, that god always instills his followers with incredible courage. In their mind, there is only one god; no possibility of another god, or even dividing their time to serve two. There is only one, and this god will not allow the entrance of any practice or symbol that would or might result in a mix of the two.

The proof of this: Jehoida revealed that one of my grandsons survived my attempt to erase all heirs to the throne, and Jehoida has proclaimed him king. I, in my rage, rushed into the temple, fully expecting my guards and supporters to follow me and aid me in destroying this man and this child. It was my opportunity to declare him a traitor and finally gain control. I will give Jehoida credit. He had posted a formidable group of soldiers around the temple, who easily prevented all except me to enter the temple.

They could have killed me there, but again their respect for their god prevented them. It didn't matter. As soon as word spread that the true king was on the throne, my followers abandoned me. Cowards! I thought I was going to escape, but they caught me. All I could think was, where was Baal when

I needed him? I had done so much to honor and promote his name and worship!

Comment

You may not think that a heart divided between the things of this world and the truth is a serious problem. Is there something in your life, however, that would convince others that you have a divided heart? How might that affect their relationship with God? Do you realize the damage you could be doing to others by living a double life, because you want to have what you want, while thinking that God will be satisfied with the leftovers of your time and commitment?

Manasseh – Rejection

My father almost died before I was born. The story goes that he was sick, and Isaiah, that interloper, was always telling my father what to do. (I will come back that in a moment.) That interloper told him to “put his house in order,” a subtle way of saying, “you are going to die.” But the problem was, my father had no heirs, not a single male child. After the fiasco of Athaliah, no female could ever be considered as ruler of the people again. There was no house of Hezekiah. His brothers had been either killed by invaders or sacrificed by their father to Molech.

So, my father began begging to God for his life. Imagine the control Isaiah gained, when he came and told my sniveling father, that God had heard him and said he would live 15 more years. And then my father asked for a sign. Isaiah suggested two options: make the sundial go either 10 steps ahead or 10 steps back. My father said 10 steps back, and, of course, it happened. Isaiah rigged it somehow. I just know it, because he had suggested the options to my father. And when it happened, my father bought it as a sign from God.

Maybe it was. He did, in fact, live 15 more years. As a result of all this, he married Hephzibah. Soon she was pregnant with me. I think Isaiah was “putting something in the water” of the other wives. No matter, I was born and at age 12 became king.

My father gave me everything I wanted. There was only one thing he expected of me, and that was to be taught by Isaiah. Oh, how I hated that. At first, it was bearable. But, as I grew a little older and realized the kingdom would be mine when my father died, it became almost intolerable. My father, who had been so strong to face up to Assyria, a risky move

encouraged by Isaiah, was now almost a puppet under Isaiah's control.

My father, because of Isaiah's involvement and his healing, had all but relinquished rule of the kingdom to Isaiah. At least, that is how I saw it. Isaiah spoke "the word of God," and my father responded, like a puppet on a string, to everything he was told. I would not understand this until much later, but as a boy, that is what it looked like. And that meant I had little freedom and had to submit to Isaiah and his constant reminders about God, the law, and my responsibility.

Austerity is no fun for a 10-12-year-old boy. So, when my father died, I promised myself to find out exactly what I had been prohibited from doing. So, I listened carefully to the people, who had been part of my grandfather's court. They seduced me with their stories of sensual delights and the power they had had, before my father Hezekiah banned all worship of foreign gods.

They told me that we should never have been attacked by Assyria if only we had paid the tribute. They said now I could have both...freedom from the tribute, and freedom to enjoy all the pleasures they had talked about. I think Isaiah knew what was happening. I am not sure *how* he knew, but he did. His words became more and more threatening, and there were people who were ready to hear what he said and take action, if he said there was a need.

I doubt they would have done anything. There is such a fear of not having a person who is a descendant of David on the throne, that I am safe from attack by them, because there is no other heir. But, to be sure, *they* didn't take the next step... *I* was the one who got rid of Isaiah. It doesn't matter what you believe about the traditions, and how it was done. (Many think

I secretly had him sawn in half.) I was rid of him, and there was no celestial retribution at that moment. (That came later.)

With Isaiah gone and no negative results...no attacks by his followers...I promptly began to restore all the religions and idolatry of my grandfather, Ahaz, and killed anyone who dared to question me. A lot of people died as a result, and those who supported my actions were more than happy to comply with my desire to rid the land of those who followed the faith of my father and Isaiah. The blood ran in the streets, and I was ecstatic with the power I enjoyed and all the pleasures I could now explore.

Then, something my father had done, backfired, and I paid the price for it. He had allowed leaders from Babylon to visit and had made an informal treaty with them. At that time, Assyria was still reeling from their losses, when they had tried to attack Jerusalem, and Babylon had successfully rebelled. But it didn't last, and when Assyria finally recovered, they reconquered Babylon and, to humiliate my country, I was seized and imprisoned in Babylon, as a warning to anyone else who had ideas of rebelling.

While there, I learned something. All that teaching from Isaiah was still stuck in my head, and I began to remember many things he had told me and warned me about what would happen. And now, even though he was dead and could not influence me in person, I had to deal with the accuracy of his words and the fact that maybe, he had not been a usurper or interloper, after all. That, in fact, his God was real, and I was the interloper.

Then I realized a humbling truth: my father was not weak or sniveling or a coward under the control of another person, but, in fact, he had been an incredibly wise and thoughtful man. I

realized that his faith in God was founded in truth...a truth that I had stubbornly refused to see, a truth I had treated as something designed to prevent me from having fun. The truth that there is, in reality, only one God and that all the others are false. The truth that the only real and lasting joy can be found in having a relationship with this one God.

Oh, how I cried and sobbed, as I realized what I had done. I had killed the prophet. I had killed so many, and allowed others to do the same. Their blood, which flowed so freely in the streets, cried out against me. How I suffered, as the truth about myself became clear. Finally, I cried out to the God of my father and Isaiah to forgive me. For days I cried, and then a peace came over me, and I cried again, but now it was for the joy of knowing that God had forgiven me.

As proof of my forgiveness, I was released and sent back to Judah. Don't ask me to explain why it happened. It just did.

When I returned and saw the results of all I had done, I wept and prayed that somehow, I could repair the damage I had done. I began to remove all the idols and places of false worship. I tried to restore some level of honor to the temple. But, as hard as I tried, I had little success, at least so far. Even my son is not impressed. To him, I am just a very good actor, who has managed to convince my jailors that I will no longer be a threat and am doing just enough to keep them from returning and destroying us completely.

I have little hope for him, and once he becomes king, I am not sure he will survive long. He is not like me. He is not strong enough to control and lead as a fanatic of false religions, and he does not believe what I tell him. So, he will not have the help of God to survive the internal threats that will come. Of that, I am sure.

Maybe there is some hope that my grandson will be able to restore sanity and faith in God. I have found a group of people who clearly believe, and I am doing all I can to position them, so that Josiah will be surrounded by wise and faithful followers of God. That fact reveals another truth I ignored. You can never completely destroy true belief in God. In attempting to do so, you will only convince those who believe, that God is in control, and you will create doubt in others. The harder you fight God, the more questions you create in those who are watching. I am praying that they will see and become the foundation that my grandson can use to restore Judah to its true heritage, its faith in the one God.

How much damage to others do you cause when you choose to do what you want, no matter the cost? Why will people ignore you, when you come to realize you have been wrong and try to change? Why do people willingly hurt others?

Pashhur – False

I am the deputy chief priest, which makes me governor of the temple and all that relates to it. I have control of all its resources, and all who serve in it, and its related activities. To get this job, I used my ability to dominate people. Some might say I am a bully. I like to think of myself as one who knows how to motivate people. It is amazing what you can accomplish with a little fear and a well-placed threat.

My friend Jehoiakim, the king, and I are of like mind. We get what we want and beware the person who gets in our way. This has allowed us to live an opulent life. A life of ease and pleasure. The only stain on all our activities is that man Jeremiah. He thinks he can stand in my way and criticize me without consequences.

He should spend a few moments with others who have dared to do so. They are not so fearless now. A well-placed whip and a few days in the stocks does wonders to change their attitude. And making sure people know what can happen to them is a great deterrent to any who would dare criticize me or, perish the thought, oppose my lifestyle.

But that man Jeremiah had the temerity to confront me, not just in public, but in the temple. He barely finished his announcement, when I snapped my fingers, and the temple guards whisked him away for a little private time in my personal chamber of horrors, and then promptly to the stocks in the courtyard in front of the temple.

Very few dare a repeat of this, and they fade into the shadows and silence. But this man, I will say this for him, he is audacious. As soon as he was released, he accosted me again, and once more in the main temple court, where all could see and hear. This second appearance caught me completely off-

guard. No one, after their private time in with my punishers, had ever shown their face in public, much less dared to proclaim, for all to hear, how they had been treated. The shock was such that I just stared at him in amazement and did nothing. I did nothing, and everyone saw it.

He finished his diatribe and walked away. It was only then that I realized what he had said and how much of a threat he was to me. He said I would be exiled along with all of my family to Babylon. That was sheer nonsense. We were vassals of Egypt, and Babylon was an upstart kingdom. Sure, they had surprised us a few years ago, but Egypt was occupied with an attack from the south and could not come to our aid, as we had agreed. We had a treaty, and we paid dearly for it. We have already put things in motion to rebel and restore that treaty. Babylon will never stand a chance.

So, I decided to ignore him and his threat. There is more than one way to silence a person. Laughing at someone and treating them as inconsequential is often as powerful as a beating. Being treated as insignificant can be very effective. As a result, everyone else belittles them too, until they retreat in silence. It usually works, but again, not this time, and he showed up once more with even wilder threats and warnings.

This time, I became furious. I had him arrested and was about to have him killed, when a group of leaders showed up. I knew all of them and they, in general, were cowards all. But this man had stirred up in them, memories of the reign of Josiah and the wonders of the age of Hezekiah. They babbled about another prophet, who had threatened the people with destruction, if they didn't repent or some other nonsense. However, Hezekiah didn't have him killed for such treason. Instead, he listened and led the people in a time of repentance.

My attempts to make them listen to me failed, and Jeremiah escaped me again. Now things had become serious. Even my staunchest supporters saw my failure to control the people. This was unacceptable, but it also meant I would have to use other people and methods to undermine this lunatic, who dared to challenge me. I would need to create suspicion and distrust. I knew just how to accomplish that. I would also have to deal with Ahikam, who was a key person in supporting Jeremiah, but that would be easy, once I discredited Jeremiah.

I called my friend Hananiah, who was part of a group of prophets who knew how to manipulate information and make it sound like the message came from God. He has been very useful in many other similar cases, when we wanted to avoid direct confrontations with someone who was popular or respected. It is better to use a word from God to render such a person impotent. Hananiah was in total agreement, because he too was beginning to have issues with Jeremiah, who always contradicted what he was proclaiming to be God's message.

Once we had decided on a plan, all we had to do was wait for Jeremiah to do something we could use to bring into question his veracity and legitimacy as a prophet. It would mean waiting for him to speak first, so we could attack him and his sanity. It was not long, and Jeremiah provided us with what we needed. He showed up in court, yes, they let him in, wearing a wooden yoke, (Bizarre, exactly), saying that soon we would be under the yoke of Babylon.

Hananiah saw his opportunity and leaped to his feet to ridicule the man and his actions. His words were brilliant. No, we would not be subjected to Babylon, because Egypt would destroy them and restore all the riches of the temple and so on. It was perfect, because no one in the court wanted to hear

words about their being enslaved and losing their privileged status. And as he finished, he broke the wooden yoke of Jeremiah to symbolize that, in fact, the yoke of Babylon would be broken and all the treasures of the temple restored.

Jeremiah is smart, though. I must admit it. Instead of being cowered by this, he astutely responded with words of agreement. He said that he truly hoped that all would be restored. He looked right at Hananiah and said, I pray your words will come true. But hear me well, if they do not, it is because you did not listen to the warnings.

The court laughed and thanked him for his words. It looked like our plan would work. Until a week later, when Jeremiah returned, wearing an iron yoke this time. How do you break an iron yoke? Hananiah was caught off-guard, by this unexpected return of someone we thought we had humiliated into silence. And when Jeremiah let the yoke fall and hit the ground, there was silence, as the thud echoed off the stone walls of the court. Then he just glared at me and Hananiah, daring us to respond. I have never been stared into silence before.

Oh, did I mention that he also spoke a curse against Hananiah for lying and false prophecy? That caused more than a few jaws to drop in surprise. I gave little thought to all of this, until news arrived of the sudden and mysterious death of Hananiah. Now, things were getting way out of hand. I must do something to stop this! Unfortunately, every time I tried, there was always someone interfering.

I had him banned from the temple, but he convinced his scribe Barak to find an open window looking out over the temple court, from which he read a scroll of prophecies. Included in it was a history of what my friends and I had done in an

attempt to silence him. But, before I could get to him, a group of the “holier than thou” crowd reached him first and secreted him out of the temple.

I saw no other option but to let the king know what was afoot and use my skills to convince him not to listen to the words of the scroll. If he were to hear them, it could mean the end of everything he enjoyed. He understood exactly what I was saying and the truth of my message. So, when they came with the scroll, he let them read it, and then he just cut it up, piece by piece, and threw it into the fire.

Another plan I had put in motion was for a friend in exile to write a letter to the king, condemning Jeremiah as a traitor, for telling them to do everything they could to live peacefully in Babylon. Furthermore, they were to do all they could to help Babylon continue to prosper. Jeremiah’s response was to place Shemiah under a curse, stating that he and his family would die without descendants, which was a preposterous thing to say...until a family member died. As a result, Shemiah refused to help me ever again. .

I was running out of options and losing control. People were not as afraid of me, as they had been in the past. Then Jeremiah gave me what I thought would be my greatest opportunity to be rid of him. We finally had some relief from the attacks of the Babylonians, so Jeremiah decided to leave the city. He said it was to travel and see a piece of land he had purchased as a guarantor, a traditional role when a family member is in debt. It was not hard to twist that into saying he was trying to escape as a spy and traitor. It worked wonderfully, and they threw him into an empty cistern, half-filled with mud. The goal was for him to sink into the mud and suffocate or slowly starve to death. A fitting end!

But someone got to Zedekiah. Yep, our fourth king since Josiah, who was both sympathetic to Jeremiah and terrified of him. He chose to believe that these happenings were not just chance events...the death of Hananiah, Shemaiah's loss of a family member, and so on. Everything Jeremiah had said was miraculously coming true. So, Zedekiah had him rescued and placed in prison.

Now, he sits in prison, getting fed from the king's table each day. Me, I lost it all. I was captured by the Babylonians, as they returned from attacking Egypt, and now I and all of my family are in exile. A strange turn of events. At first, I thought I might get some peace here and begin to reestablish my authority and control. The problem is, now I have to deal with Ezequiel. And if you think Jeremiah was a problem and somewhat of a lunatic, then you have not met Ezequiel!

Even my family is no longer afraid of me and blames me for all that has happened. It's not my fault. Everything was fine, until Jeremiah got in the way.

Sanballat – Intimidation

How well I remember the day that letter arrived from Persia, authorizing the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem and the temple within. I knew the moment I read it, that I had to find a way to stop this from happening! I knew from the first... that letter would cause problems.

I was the governor of Samaria. I had control over a significant territory and access to many resources of the Persian empire, as well as the taxes levied by them. I had wisely used these assets to build a solid economy, which further enhanced my wealth and position.

Those would be threatened, if ever the directions of the letter were carried out. I also knew that it would be a difficult, if not impossible, task. For a while, I was not too worried, until Nehemiah arrived with more letters for the governors. Those letters gave him authority to rebuild the wall and temple, as had been stated in the first letter. Additionally, it gave him authority to draw a monthly amount from governors of the surrounding regions, to provide him an income, funds to hire people, and a fairly generous amount to begin the work... something he never did, at least nothing for himself.

I had no idea who this man was. The one thing I did know was that he was a stranger to the area and an unknown person to those he was to engage in the work. I also knew there were few people available to carry out such a huge task, and I planned to make sure even less would be willing.

What I didn't reckon on, was the uncanny ability of this man to organize and inspire people to believe in the possibility of great things. I found that out quickly, when my attempt to accuse him of leading a rebellion was ignored. He knew my words were empty, because he had been sent by the king. I

also learned what that meant, when a friend returned from the court and told me that this man was cupbearer to the king. Not someone you can frighten with mere threats.

I quickly summoned my friends and laid out my plans. They were worried, as well, and ready to help.

Step one was to do everything possible to discourage the people from working. Tobiah's job was to criticize them and encourage them to do the bare minimum needed in rebuilding the wall. We had several of our friends and relatives, who would do their best to create weak spots in the areas assigned to them.

Both Tobiah and I had at least one child married to a person of importance that we could influence. My daughter is married to the grandson of the high priest, Eliashib. Tobiah has two children married to influential people. These marriages should give us access to spread rumors, question decisions, and undermine the work at several levels.

At first, it looked like it might work, but that man Nehemiah was very astute and had an amazing knowledge of each part of the wall. Before work began, he detailed what needed to be done and how it should be done. Besides that, he used the soldiers, sent with him by the king, to run regular inspections. So, Tobiah's comments and ridicule fell on deaf ears, and any poor work was seen and corrected almost immediately.

While all this was going on, Geshem was organizing his people to send raiding parties to attack Nehemiah and those working on the walls. Usually, even the threat of attack would be enough to scare people. This was important, because we both knew if Jerusalem were to be rebuilt, it would affect our economy greatly. Over time, we would be handing over a

portion of what we enjoyed to those living in Jerusalem. That is because a rebuilt Jerusalem would have a serious influence on the movement of caravans through the region. It sits on the most prosperous of those routes and is also the easiest for travel.

Again, that man Nehemiah had an answer. He must have had some kind of military background. He knew just what to do to reduce the fear of attack, and he even showed them how to use their strength to make any attack difficult. Also, the troop of soldiers he had been given, were professional soldiers under his authority. He knew just how to position them, and they were loyal to him.

So, I decided on a more direct approach. I began sending him letters. Except, he refused to even accept them, once he learned who had sent them. He was very busy and did not have time to stop and visit me. When my fifth letter arrived with Tobiah, he declared the contents to be a lie, tore it in half, and commanded his people to focus on the work at hand, rebuilding their section of the wall, and that Tobiah should stop being a callboy for someone else.

I had hoped to get Nehemiah out of the city, where I could hire people to ambush him...a robbery gone bad, with Nehemiah on the losing end...dead. So, I moved to the next step.

I had been working on this all along. Gathering information about what was happening, what Nehemiah was doing, and most importantly what he was saying. If he didn't make a mistake, then I would twist things to suit my purpose. It was not easy. That man is, in fact, about the most honorable man I have ever met, which was even more reason to get rid of him. A man who cannot be bribed, threatened, or entrapped is a dangerous man, especially for me.

Even another threat of attack failed. Now I was desperate. Then I realized that he was not just a Jew by birth; he was a true Jew, a follower of God and all the law. Not because he had to. He was not legalistic like many of my friends. They obeyed the law but had no desire to serve their God more than was necessary. Him, he actually followed it, because he believed he had a relationship with the God who gave the law. Then, I thought of a possible way to trap him.

This time I involved Shemaiah. He had accepted many gifts from me, and now was my great opportunity to collect on them. I didn't care if he might feel like I was blackmailing him. The goal was to get Nehemiah into the temple, something allowed only to members of the family of Levi. To accomplish this, I got Geshem to organize his people and bring them to the hills outside Jerusalem. They were to threaten to attack the city, unless Nehemiah was handed over to them. When they arrived, Shemiah was to find Nehemiah and encourage him to flee to the temple for safety. Then he was to make sure all the priests saw his behavior, so his shameful action would be reported to everyone.

However, it never happened, and now Shemaiah has shut himself up in his house, because of the shame of tempting a man to violate the law of the temple. He is useless to me; all his nice words of the past were a ruse to gain my favor. He will pay for this, when I am finally rid of Nehemiah.

But I have now learned that another one is there, called Ezra, and he is teaching the law, given by their god, to the workers and everyone from the region. If I don't find a way to stop this soon, then all my business ventures and plans will be worthless. They are going to ruin me! And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, they agreed that one of every ten

men would move into the city, to further strengthen and develop it.

Then finally, I received some good news. Apparently, Nehemiah has left. He had been given permission to come to build the wall and take care of resettling the city, but it had to be done by a specified time. That time came, so he went back to the king. Finally, I got my way, and I could begin to undermine the work of Nehemiah.

I forced Eliashib to prepare a room in the temple precincts for Tobiah. (Remember his grandson was married to my daughter, and he had received many gifts and concessions from me in the past.) Again, I didn't care if he said it was blackmail. It worked, so now Tobiah has the room and easy access to all that is happening.

From there, Tobiah could keep me informed and begin to slowly erode Nehemiah's authority and work. It was going to take some time, but finally, I began to see some results. The first sign that Tobiah was succeeding, was when the people stopped bringing their tithe to care for the Levites. As a result, little by little, the Levites left town and went back to their fields. Eliashib was pleased. It meant fewer people to have to share with, and I again was generous with my concessions.

The next proof that we were gaining ground, and the people were listening to Tobiah, was that many of them began working on their Sabbath, and the gates were once again opened on that day. Now the markets could be reopened and I could regain control of the flow of commerce.

The last nail in the coffin, at least that is what I believed, was that the people began once again to allow their children to marry people who were not Jews. All was going well, and I

began to thank Nehemiah for rebuilding the city and leaving. It meant more power and financial gain for me.

All that came to a screeching halt one day. Suddenly, there he was, again! He had come back. Why?

All he had to do was look at them, and they cowered. They knew they had failed, and he let them know that clearly and simply. He also told them what to do to correct things, and they made haste to do so. The gates were closed on the Sabbath, the people began to bring their tithe, and the Levites returned to their assigned work in the temple.

They reacted this way, because they all had heard what he did to Tobiah. He had summarily taken everything from the room in the temple and threw it in the garbage. I think he would have thrown Tobiah in the same place, except Tobiah heard that Nehemiah had returned, and he quietly left the city, to wait and see what would happen. A wise move.

But Nehemiah didn't stop there. He reminded them of the law against marrying people from my tribe and several other groups, and then he threw my son out of the city, and glared at Eliashib, daring him to try and stop him from doing so. That empowered the other man, Ezra, and together they arranged for all those with mixed marriages to send their partners away. Now that is true power.

The really scary part for me, in all of this, was that Nehemiah and his group never accepted a single shekel from the taxes. Instead, they fed up to 150 locals, as well as the contingent of troops, from Nehemiah's own resources. How do you fight that?

Here I sit, wondering how long I will last as governor of my province. They have all seen how prosperous Jerusalem is

becoming, and the fact that it is not rebelling but very orderly. If this goes on too long, I will lose everything to them, and then I will end up a beggar and... No, I will just have to leave and find some other group of fools to pluck. I hear things are looking good in Egypt, and they are looking for administrators.

What are you willing to do, to get rid of someone you don't like? How far does your greed and thirst for control go? What has control of your life, that would make you willing to lie and cheat to keep what you have, in order to get more?

Haman – Hate

I will tell you exactly what I think. They don't belong here. They are foreigners and are polluting our country with their strange ideas and customs. And more than that, they are taking good jobs away from people who deserve them. It is shameful to see one of our people turned down, because one of those foreigners got there first or pulled some strings.

What is worse, is that one of our kings took the people of the lands we had conquered, deported them from their country and scattered them throughout our land. I am not against that policy in general. I support fully removing a conquered people from their land, sending them some place far away to make sure they never rebel, then replace them with the poor and wretched of some other conquered nation. It makes it harder for them to rebel.

But somehow, when we conquered Babylon, they chose to let one of those outsiders live. Some man, they said, was the wisest man they had ever met. He was the high counsel to their greatest king and ran the whole kingdom, when one of their kings went nuts, and then he handed it all back after the king's mind cleared. I would have killed that crazy king and taken over. Why give a man, who is clearly nuts, a chance to recover his throne?

Anyhow, that man, I think they called him Daniel, did just that. Later, during the reign of a subsequent king, they called him to interpret some foolish scribbling on the wall. He did so and was offered half the kingdom as a reward. He turned that down as well. I will admit, that was pretty smart, because by the next day we had conquered Babylon and killed that king.

Somehow, one of our key advisors learned about that event and how Daniel was an incredible administrator, and he

convinced our king that such a man was indispensable. From all I have heard, he was indeed incredibly adept at sorting out issues and finding solutions. The puzzling part, though, is that he was not interested in rewards and promotions. That attitude makes it hard for anyone else to get ahead. The king sees that and determines we should all live that way...doing our jobs, just because it is the right thing to do.

I learned that a number of people conspired to get rid of him but could not find something about which to accuse him, in order to do so. The only thing they discovered was that he was absolutely loyal to his God and would have nothing to do with our gods. So, when they learned that, they thought they had found the key to his downfall. Our laws state that we are all to worship our king as a god, but Daniel refused and continued to pray to his God.

They thought they had him and even managed to force the king to throw him to the lions. No one knows how he did it, but he survived the night. It is said, the lions just laid down by him and went to sleep. The king was so pleased that he gave Daniel a new position, even though Daniel protested against this and then threw all his conspirators into the lion's den. None of them made it to the ground before the lions had killed them.

The only good thing to come of all this, was that he recommended his people be returned to their land. The king agreed, and many seized the opportunity and left...something about a prophecy that "a remnant would return." The only problem was, not enough of them left. Now we have these accursed people being appointed to all kinds of positions. It is getting harder and harder to get ahead. They are hard-working

and honest, but they will not accept a bribe or fail to do their work properly and to the highest standard.

Now, I have to deal with one of them every day, and I am furious with his behavior and attitude. He refuses to pay the proper respect to one who is clearly better than he is: Me. I am a true Persian. I was born of a noble family. He, though, is a cur, born of a conquered people who should be groveling at my feet.

I get apoplectic just thinking about it. I feel the rage seething within me, but feel powerless to deal with him or find a proper way to be rid of him and all his kind.

At least for a while, I had something to distract me, so I could refocus my energy. The king had a falling-out with the current queen. It was just another example of the infuriating influence of these outsiders. She actually refused to come, when the king called her. Such arrogance! I am sure she learned that behavior from those Jews. There! I have finally named my enemy. That is such a relief.

Back to the queen... The king had tasked me with finding him a new wife. I scoured the country for lovely and submissive women. Women who abide by the traditions of our land and culture. I found one, right here in the capital city. I watched her. She listened to everything she was told and did exactly what was expected of her. As I had hoped, she was the one chosen. Life should have returned to normal.

That was, until once again, I was confronted by that accursed Jew. I am going to tell you his name, Mordecai. It was while I was carrying out official business in the king's name. Everyone but that man knew how to show respect. They all bowed low and submitted to the rules of our class system. Not

him. He saw me coming. I know he saw me, because he looked directly at me and just stood there. Stood there while everyone else bowed. Oh, the rage that grew inside me. I had to find a way to destroy him! People were watching to see if I would allow such insubordination.

I controlled my rage and began to research him and his people. I decided that it was not enough, just to destroy him. I had to make him *really* pay, so I sought a way to destroy *all* of them. *All* of the Jews throughout the kingdom. I finally decided it would be best to convince the king that they needed to be destroyed, because they were a dangerous people. That, plus the generous offer I made to search them out and destroy them, convinced the king to sign the document I had written, authorizing that all Jews be destroyed...every man, woman, and child, on a specific day.

I was ecstatic! I went home, and my family and friends joined me for a great celebration. I then ordered a unique gallows to be built, where I would personally hang the wretch, Mordecai.

The next day, there he was as defiant as ever. I was ready to destroy him then and there, but a messenger from the king interrupted me, with an urgent summons to go to the king. He said the king wanted to consult me, immediately, on an important matter. So, when the king asked for my advice about how he should truly honor a person who had pleased him, I told him to dress that person in a robe of the king, put him on the king's horse, and have a high official lead him around the town, declaring this is how the king honors his faithful servants.

He was thrilled with my idea. I thought it was brilliant, too, because I was sure to be the one so honored. However, I was shocked to hear him tell me to make haste and do exactly as I

had suggested, for the man I detested above all others, Mordecai. My humiliation was unbearable. When my family learned of it, they all agreed that I was in big trouble.

But, hope sprang from the ashes of my shame. I received a special invitation from the queen to join her and the king for lunch. There was still hope. Then, my joy increased even more, when she invited me to join her again the next day, at which time she would tell us the reason for her unique invitation. I was elated. I had been invited by the queen and king twice, to dine with them privately. I was sure I was about to be rewarded, to get what I deserved.

Then it all crashed to the ground, as the queen revealed that she, in fact, was a Jew, and that I was conspiring to kill all of her people. She pled with the king, asking if there was any way for the edict to be rescinded. In great turmoil and anger, he left the room. I immediately approached the queen, falling at her feet, grasping her robe, begging for mercy. At that very moment, the king returned. My position on the floor, and the manner in which I held her clothing, was all the king needed to see to make him fly into a rage, believing I was attempting to attack his beloved wife. That outburst brought the guards who, according to custom, immediately covered my person with anything they could find, so the king would not see me, and there would be no chance for me to utter a single word of defense.

When that happened, I knew my fate was sealed. But the worst was yet to come. I was to die on the very gallows I had constructed for the purpose of killing Mordecai! When the rug or curtain was finally removed, it was even worse than I could have imagined. They had gathered all my family, and one-by-one, the guards were carrying out the proscribed penalty for

what I had done. I watched as they were all executed. Then in numbness and anguish I was led, stumbling, to the gallows I had built, to be hanged. Hanged in utter shame.

My only thoughts were: “It was the fault of those Jews. Why did that king ever bring Daniel here? Why did he permit the Jews into the service of the palace? Why?” And then...

Racism and privilege affect and infect our thoughts and actions in subtle ways.

Jealousy is a powerful and dangerous emotion. It will drive a person to destroy others.

What are the things that cause jealousy? What is the relationship between jealousy and a desire for what one thinks is their right to have and enjoy? Is it okay to desire to have good things and status in this world?

Cripple by pool – Self-preservation

I have been lying here by the pool since... I have forgotten how long. It is not a pleasant place. It is mostly a sad place. People come here hoping for a miracle. But there are so many people, and only one can win the prize.

A long time ago, or so the tradition goes, a sick person was sitting by the pool and saw the water move in an unusual manner. The tradition is that God had sent an angel, who stirred the water. For some reason, this person decided to put their foot in the water. It was hot, they were tired, and the water felt so good. As they relaxed, others saw a change in the appearance of the person. They said it was like a glow.

After a few minutes, that person got up and suddenly realized they were better. In fact, they were much better. So much better, that they started leaping and shouting about how they saw the water and put their foot in, and felt something change. Well, everybody decided to jump in, crawl in, roll in, or get into the water any way possible. But, nothing happened to any of them.

Sadly, they all crawled out and began to watch the water. The tradition says that this movement of water has happened several times, and every time it happens, the first one to get into the water is healed. Sounds fantastic, doesn't it?

Nowadays, the place is packed with people. The stronger ones fight for space at the pool's edge. Leaving your spot means losing it. No one cares for anyone else. They are selfish and spoiled. I have seen more anger and bitterness here by the pool than you could believe possible. Worse is when the family members fight with each other over the best places, the ones closest to the pool.

Finally, the rulers stepped in and said no one could actually lie by the pool. It was interfering with those who came to draw water. That makes sense. They are not worried about being healed, but they do need the water to drink and stay healthy, and it does mean that those who are not crippled like me have the best chance of getting into the pool in time.

It is a lonely place. My family, in a way, has abandoned me here. Oh, they come by to bring food, help me relieve myself when needed. Often someone is assigned to stay nearby, in case I need something or to get me to the water, if an angel should come and stir the water.

I am beginning to believe it is a lot of nonsense. In all my years here, I don't think I have ever seen anyone healed. What I have seen is a lot of people using the situation to make money. They come and sell food and other things to our family. It is all a scam. The food is lousy, and all the other stuff they sell is junk. It never lasts and usually breaks.

Then there are the priests and scribes. I can't prove it, but I think they are getting a cut from the sellers. I would complain about it, but I have seen others complain, only to be promptly kicked out, and the priests were very unkind and thoughtless about how they did it. I watched them literally pick up one man and toss him out like a bag of garbage. Unfortunately for him, none of his family were there, and he lay in a heap for hours before they returned. Based on their expression and cries, the manhandling had made his condition worse.

You want to know something else? Those leaders just looked at his family members and ignored their pleas and complaints. That is, until I heard them warn the family that if they weren't careful, they would be banned from the temple. That is when I saw those people become truly afraid. And I also saw one of

them hand a small bag of money to one of the scribes and whisper in his ear. The scribe pretended to ignore him but took the money and tapped the others on the shoulders, as if to signal they had gotten what they had hoped for. A few days later the man was brought back. He looked terrible, and they looked truly terrified. I believe they were told to wait a few days before they could bring the poor man back. Actually, I think they ordered his family to bring him back as a reminder of who was in charge, and that we were being allowed to stay there out of their good graces.

Then one day, this stranger came by and asked me if wanted to walk. I believe it was on a Sabbath. I looked at him incredulously. Was he blind? Could he not see that I was cripple? Didn't he realize where I was and why I was there? But he asked me again. Do you want to walk? So, with all the sarcasm I could muster, I said of course I did.

Then I did my best to make him look a fool. I told him about the tradition of the pool as if he were a child just hearing the story for the first time. Then I stated the obvious. Yes, I was there in hopes of being healed but with little hope of that ever happening. I was a cripple and there were a lot of people who could easily get to the pool before me.

He just stood there and let me vent at him and pour out all the bile and hatred in my heart. It was unfair. What did I ever do to deserve being born a cripple? On and on I went, until I could say no more. He just listened and waited. When I finally finished my diatribe, he said that he understood why I was so angry. He touched my shoulder and bowed his head.

Then he reached out and took my hand. I thought he was crazy, if he thought that by taking my hand I would be able to get up. But my body didn't hear my thoughts. Instead, I felt

my legs straighten and strengthen. I had no idea what was going on and yet, the next thing I knew, I was on my feet and dancing.

I danced right out of there and into the open plaza by the pool. It was at just this moment that those scribes decided to come for a visit. They recognized me at once and promptly told me to settle down. It was the Sabbath and such behavior would not be tolerated. The next thing they said scared me into almost wishing I had not been healed. They began to accuse me of breaking the Sabbath by carrying my bed.

Oh, I forgot, the man who had touched me told me to pick it up and take it with me. I think he was just trying to help me believe that I was truly healed and would not need to return. I was so excited that I completely forgot what day it was. Their comment brought me back to earth, and it scared me. They told me not to go anywhere until they could consult with the priests regarding this flagrant violation of the Sabbath.

I know what they really wanted. They wanted time to consult together on a reasonable fine to levee on my family for my law-breaking behavior. I knew, too, that it would not be reasonable. As they were turning to leave, I told them about the man who had touched and healed me and had ordered me to pick up my bed. They became very interested in him. If I could identify the man, they said, then maybe they would consider not fining me or banning me from the temple for my indiscretion.

I told them I didn't know who he was. I had never seen him before. They looked at me like I was lying and just left. When they did that, I knew that my family and I were in serious trouble and would probably be banned from the temple. As a result, my family would likely renounce me and treat me as

dead. They would do everything they could in order to be restored. A ban from the temple is worse than being condemned to death. You wouldn't understand that, because you are not a Jew, but not being able to bring your sacrifice to the temple means being condemned to an eternity in Sheol.

I wandered away from the pool. I was not going to wait for their return or risk having to face my family, knowing what was about to happen. As I wandered, lost in my misery, he showed up again. Where he came from I have no idea, but this time I recognized him. I had heard enough stories about a miracle healer and his description that you could not fail to identify him. It was just the first time I had ever really looked at him.

He looked at me with sadness in his eyes and warned me to be careful, lest I commit a greater error. A greater error? What could be worse than what was about to happen? I smiled and said thanks. As soon as he left, I rushed to find those scribes. This time I had some sense not to blurt out my information until they swore on the altar in the temple that my family and I would not be banned. Once they agreed, I told them it was Jesus, the Nazarene. They were ecstatic and even gave me a few shekels to guarantee that I would testify to the violation of the Sabbath by Jesus.

I was overjoyed at my good fortune. I had been healed, had avoided being banned from the temple, and even received money for my information. And then I realized that I had just abandoned the very person who had healed me. What kind of person am I, who would do that to someone who had helped me? I am only now beginning to realize how much I may have lost, as a result of my selfishness.

Herods 1 2 3 4 - Fear

Herod the Great – killed the children of Bethlehem and members of his own family

Herod Antipas – killed John the Baptist

Herod Agrippa 1 – killed James and died horribly

Herod Agrippa 2 – jailed Paul and then sent him to trial in Rome

HEROD THE GREAT – Well, isn't this a fun thing. I don't think we have ever been in one place together like this.

HEROD ANTIPAS – To be honest it would be impossible, since you were dead before I was even born.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – Grandfather, I am more than happy about that fact. You managed to kill off most of the family. Actually, I am amazed that our family survived at all.

HEROD AGRIPPA 2 – For my part, I am also glad I missed out on that privilege, and I am not pleased at all for this meeting. I believe it is only possible, because we were some of the vilest leaders ever seen in the history of Israel.

HEROD THE GREAT – Shame on you. Each of us managed to keep the name of this country alive and valuable to the Romans. If my family had been less focused on scheming to get rid of me, I could have done so much more.

HEROD ANTIPAS – We did so to protect ourselves from your growing insanity and violence. At the mere hint of the birth of a Messiah and a possible rebellion, you killed all the babies in that small village. Really, what threat were they to you? What baby is going to lead a rebellion? You were already an old man and had no interest in any of us.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – You were insane. How could you do that and then kill your own wife and two of your sons?

HEROD THE GREAT – Oh, you want to go there and talk about that? You weren't much better. You seduced Philip's wife and married her. I never did that.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – Yes, but you had how many wives?

HEROD THE GREAT – Be careful what you say. I hear that some of your parties and relationships with family members created a lot of tension with the Jews.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – Yes, but you created the problem. You infuriated them over and over. Your single-minded hatred of that Jewish family, the Hasmonaeans, almost ruined any hope of our creating a dynasty and surviving beyond you.

HEROD THE GREAT – Well, you did! And those ungrateful Jews had no regard for all the machinations I had to go through with Rome and the battles I fought, so they could actually have a country and be free to live there. Even my incredible generosity and skill in rebuilding the temple was not enough to get them to see all that I had done. No other religion had such freedom.

HEROD ANTIPAS – You want to talk about the temple? Yes, you started it, but I had to finish it. It was about the only thing that managed to keep the peace.

HEROD THE GREAT – Oh don't blame that on me! I was not the cause of your problems. You decided to behead their prophet, John the Baptist. That's what you get for seducing Herodias, the wife of your half-brother, and playing games with her daughter. And then you acted the idiot, when you had a chance to appease all the Jews, but you blew it. You knew

they wanted Jesus dead, but what did you do? You played games, acted the part of a spoiled brat by asking for a miracle, when instead you should have killed him on the spot.

HEROD ANTIPAS – Hey, you try to live with Herodias. I am not sure who seduced who. And that daughter of hers. Seems like they were always scheming for something. And about that Jesus thing. I decided it would be better for Rome to deal with it. Let the Jews see and understand what it takes to keep Rome happy.

HEROD ANTIPAS 1 – Well, it only worked for a while, and then both you and Pilate got yourselves banished for your lack of control.

HEROD ANTIPAS – Don't blame me for that. If Dad, here, had not divided the kingdom among the four half-brothers, maybe we wouldn't have had so much trouble. None of us seemed to get the upper hand. Yes, dad, that is your fault.

HEROD THE GREAT – Well, I figured that the one who truly deserved it, would be the one who figured out how to get rid of the others.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – Well, it didn't work. And all your murder, mayhem, and schemes made my life difficult.

HEROD ANTIPAS – Oh no you don't, I am not letting you blame me for any of that! You went too far. You played it smart when you got rid of the Messiah follower, James. But you went way too far when you started acting like a Caesar. You know, letting them worship you as if you were a god.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – Yeh, well you weren't there, and I needed the emotional boost. I got James, and the Jews were happy. Then when I arrested Peter and planned his execution,

I thought I had pulled off the *coup de tat* needed to really restore relations with the Jewish leaders. They had failed multiple times and were so excited, they were about ready to proclaim me their beloved ruler. But it all fell apart when Peter escaped. The guards had some ridiculous story about his just disappearing. They said they heard gates opening and closing but were frozen in place.

HEROD AGRIPPA 2 – That failure on your part, both letting Peter escape and letting the foreigners honor you like a god, meant I was in a hopeless situation.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – Well, I would like to see you stop whatever freed Peter. Rumors say it was an angel. How do you fight an angel? Tell me.

HEROD AGRIPPA 2 – Well, you deserved what you got. No mortal man is a god, and you learned that truth in a most painful way.

HEROD ANTIPAS – Listen to you two squabbling over minor stuff. He did this, he failed here. Herod Agrippa 2, you are right, but it all came apart under you. All the work we had done came to nothing. And I mean nothing. The whole land was leveled, and you had one chance to stop it, but you blew it.

HEROD AGRIPPA 2 – What do you mean...I had a chance?

HEROD THE GREAT – I agree with HEROD, AGRIPPA 1. You had the opportunity of a lifetime to set things right, restore your relations with the Jews, and save our kingdom. You had Paul in your hands, and you let him go.

HEROD AGRIPPA 2 – And what do you propose I should have done? Executed him on the spot? By the time I knew

anything, he had appealed to Rome as a Roman citizen, and you know how protective they are regarding the rights of their citizens.

HEROD ANTIPAS – Yeh, but you blew it. Why didn't you use all the skills at subterfuge you had learned from us? Any one of us would have found a way to influence a key person in Rome to have Paul handed over to be dealt with. Rome was a mess then. Nero was insane and easily manipulated. You had already done that on many occasions.

HEROD AGRIPPA 2 – Really. Well, I wisely saw that it might not work. He was on a rampage killing Jews and so on. It was not the time for me to ask for such a favor.

HEROD THE GREAT – Wimp, coward! Any one of us would have found a way, but you let him go and then sided with the Romans.

HEROD AGRIPPA 2 – Yes, I did, and I tried to convince the Jewish leaders that there was no hope of their successfully opposing Rome. They were fed up with the rebellions. One more would have been devastating.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – Your speech was impressive. I have seen a copy. It may actually have been the best speech from any of us. But by letting Paul go free, you lost the only real bargaining chip you had to win the argument. All they could see was an enemy...worse, a traitor. And you sealed all our fates. You could have redeemed us all, but you blew it.

HEROD THE GREAT – As a result, the unthinkable happened. The Romans came and literally leveled the land. All our great building projects...leveled.

HEROD ANTIPAS – Even the temple your great-grandfather and I worked so hard to build. The one thing the Jews actually thanked us for...leveled. All that is left is a piece of a wall and a bunch of ruins.

HEROD AGRIPPA 1 – Nothing left. All our scheming wasted. All our frivolousness exposed for everyone to remember instead of remembering that we managed to keep their precious land intact for them. Now it's all gone.

HEROD AGRIPPA 2 – Well, let's be honest for once. All that scheming was just that: scheming. None of us really cared about their faith or future. All we wanted was to be the ruler and do whatever we wanted, and we did just that. The proof is in where we are now, and the fact that we are even having this conversation!

Ananias and Sapphira – Status

Ananias – My dear, these are truly incredible days.

Sapphira – And we have been part of it, since the day Peter preached the sermon.

Ananias – I can remember it like it was yesterday. The awareness of my sin and the sense of pardon I felt at that moment.

Sapphira – I agree. The sensation and emotions were incredible.

Ananias – For a while, being in the temple and listening to the teaching helped me maintain that incredible emotional connection.

Sapphira – You mean you have felt like it has faded a little?

Ananias – Yes, I was almost afraid to admit it to you, for fear you would criticize me.

Sapphira – I have been feeling the same and wishing for some way to reconnect with the emotion.

Ananias – There is one other item. I have felt like I am getting lost in the crowd. Do you understand what I am saying?

Sapphira – I think I do. On that first day, we were part of a unique event. Special, so to speak. We were the first to hear about salvation and to respond.

Ananias – Yes. Yes, exactly. We got special attention and were greeted by each apostle personally.

Sapphira – But now there are so many more people than before. They have shifted their focus to the newest ones, and I feel like we have been forgotten.

Ananias – Well, they probably haven't forgotten us. But I agree that we have sort of faded into the background. And I think they expect us to take their place and do for the others what they did for us.

Sapphira – I know what you mean, but why would anyone want us to be their mentors? What do we have to offer?

Ananias – Some are doing it. They invite people to their homes and share in meals together. They choose a topic from the teaching of the week and discuss how to apply it to their life.

Sapphira – I know who you are referring to. There are a number of these groups, but they also are doing something to attract people's attention.

Ananias – You mean, like Stephen, who is not only helping others but is clearly able to defend our new faith to others. I have heard him talk, and no one, I mean no one, can beat him in a debate. People are crowding around him to learn more and be able to do the same.

Sapphira – Then there is Philip. If you think Peter was a preacher, Philip is better. I have heard him stand before crowds of people, small groups of people, and individuals. His words are so clear, it is amazing if someone doesn't respond.

Ananias – They are impressive, and I know we could never do what they do. Neither of us are comfortable as public speakers.

Sapphira – True. I heard you the last time you tried to tell a story. I ached for you, my love.

Ananias – I felt you crying for me. And I remember watching you try to share the gospel with the group of women who came to your small tea party. I cried for you, as you stumbled your

way through the points. I know you had worked so hard at memorizing it all, but it just came out flat.

Sapphira – So what are we going to do?

Ananias – I have been thinking about that. There is one area where we may be able to succeed like another of those people we have been hearing about, Barnabas.

Sapphira – Oh, I remember hearing about him. He sold a piece of property and gave the money to the leaders to help care for those in need. He is one of a number who have been giving generously.

Ananias – Exactly. And I think this is just the group for us to be a part of. We have a number of properties and have talked about selling at least one of them.

Sapphira – And I know just which one to sell. If we do it right, we will get more for it than what Barnabas got for his piece of land.

Ananias – I think you are on the same track as I am. Let's sell that piece and give the same amount as Barnabas, but don't tell anyone about the balance.

Sapphira – Oh yes. If we do it right, no one will know what we really got, and we will get the same praise and recognition as he did.

Ananias – And best of all, we will be part of an inner group again. People that others want to be around and listen to. I will take care of it right away.

Several weeks later...

Sapphira – Do you think we have waited long enough to go ahead with our plan?

Ananias – More than enough time. In fact, I took the money over this morning, and just a few minutes ago I received a message that Peter and others wanted to see me.

Sapphira – Husband, I wish you had let me know in advance. Look at me. I can't go over there now. I just finished with some work on the house and need to clean up. But you go ahead. We don't want to keep them waiting and have them wonder why at least one of us hasn't come as requested.

Ananias – Great! I will go ahead and talk with them, until you can clean up and follow me.

At the home of Peter...

Peter – Ananias, do you have any idea what you have done?

Ananias – Well, yes. My wife and I sold a piece of property, so we could help those in need and work with Barnabas.

Peter – No, that is not what you have done. You have tried to deceive the Holy Spirit.

Ananias – What are you talking about?

Peter – Yes, Ananias. You sold the property, and you could have done anything you wanted with the money, even kept some for yourself, and God would have been pleased. But you tried to deceive not only us, but God, by telling us you were giving the entire amount of the sale. Giving is not about impressing God. That is impossible. It is about loving others like God, which means that any amount would have been enough, as long as it was given out of love and true obedience.

Ananias – But we thought... We wanted to make everyone listen to us and...

Peter – Even now you reveal your heart, and God has determined your penalty. The young men are here, who will bury you.

Ananias – Is stunned to silence. Then collapses.

An hour later...

Peter – Sapphira you have sinned and will pay.

Sapphira – What are you talking about? I thought we were invited, so you could personally thank us for our generosity. We gladly sold a piece of property and gave you what we got from its sale.

Peter – Your own words have condemned you. You and your husband agreed to deceive God. You thought you could fool God and receive honor and praise from others.

Sapphira – How can you say that? The gift was very generous.

Peter – No, it was not. It was selfish, and you, like your husband, have been judged and punished.

Sapphira – What has happened to my husband? Then in stunned silence, she realizes that he is dead and collapses because of the shock in realizing what has happened.

How often do we deceive ourselves, and others, and so believe we can deceive God? We want people to listen to us and believe what we have to say. We want them to follow us, and so we fake our faith and use things to create a false image. While we may fool others, we cannot fool God.

Think about ways in which we, as Christians, try to create a false image of who we are, so others will give us special treatment.

Bar-Jesus – Deceit

I grew up on this island, and the Romans have been here as long as I can remember. I learned quickly that to do more than survive you had to find a way to earn the favor of the Romans. You had to have the best fruits and vegetables, the best meats, the best products for the home, and the best clothing. If you didn't, you wouldn't sell enough to do more than survive.

There is one other way you could do even better... if you developed a skill that the Romans really needed or appreciated. Women became dancers, great cooks, and other things. For them, being attractive was a big help in getting attention. For the men, we weren't so fortunate. We had to gain their attention by other means.

First, you had to learn what skills they were lacking. This was a challenge, because it was a shifting target. Not in the sense that they didn't know what they were lacking or were incredibly fickle. It was because the Romans had a system in place that involved the constant change of leaders and soldiers posted here. It had to do with a rule that allowed a proconsul, the government agent, to stay only one year. On rare occasions, but almost never, he might stay longer than that.

So almost every year there would be a new proconsul, and each one had different skills and abilities. That meant that while you might be valuable for one of them, the next one might have no use at all for your skill. One might be terrible with numbers and figures and needed a banker. The next might be a master in handling finances and could spot errors with his eyes closed, but was lousy with personal relations and culture.

One might be an incredible administrator, who adapted well to our culture. The next might be a complete idiot, who

constantly offended people and made a wreck of daily operations. That kind didn't last long, though. Rome had very little patience for gross negligence and poor administration. Based on what we learned about those being appointed, they were typically selected from retired consuls or members of the senate. So, they should have had good administrative skills. Politics!

So that meant, if you really wanted to have longevity, you needed to find something they all wanted. My father helped me understand this and made sure I had enough education, so I could speak clearly and knew the basics about how the Roman government functioned. But nothing seemed to give us any hope of finding a way in, nothing that would last for more than a year or two.

It was during one of those one-year stints that I saw something I thought I could use to guarantee long-term service, usefulness, and access. I saw the latest proconsul create a shrine and then spend hours in front of it asking questions. He would throw dice, stones, and a number of other actions in his attempt to gain answers to key issues in the courts, like how to make decisions that would ensure a prosperous future for himself after his year was done, plus other activities that would enhance his ability to succeed and gain further bonuses.

When my father heard this, he immediately sent me to apprentice with a sorcerer he knew. I thought the man was a hoax, but many people didn't. So, either he was incredibly good at figuring things out and giving wise advice under the guise of witchcraft, incredibly adept at fooling people and deflecting their objections when he was wrong, or he actually had contact with spirits or other powers.

I applied myself to learn all three skills when needed. The teacher was impressed with my quick ability to learn, duplicate, and even embellish what I was taught. It was not long before I began to have my own clients. Mostly local people, but I needed them, and I needed them to believe that I had contact with spirits and could see what others couldn't see. They would be the ones that would talk about me, and if all went well, the regular soldiers would hear and become curious.

Oh, one other key piece of this process was to make sure I was fully informed on the gods, beliefs, and superstitions of the Romans. And then I struck gold. I actually heard a spirit talk, and what I was told actually happened. Now my name began to spread and, as hoped, the soldiers began to come. They told their captains, and so on, until at last a proconsul called me. He had a small issue to resolve and asked me to consult a particular god...they all had their favorites.

I said I would try, but he had to remember that if the god or spirit chose not to respond or gave false information, that was not my fault. I had learned along the way that sometimes the gods were like that, just as likely to give bad information as good. This is where my training paid off, as well as the skills I had developed in reading people and situations. I went into my routine...we all have our routines...and finally gave him an answer. He accepted and used it, and now I am the official sorcerer to the office of the proconsul.

I have been right often enough to keep my position, even when there is a change of personnel. They take time to give a report to the next man, and it usually includes a word of advice to retain me as a special advisor on matters of culture and the spirit world. Some use me more than others, but they all do to

some extent. As a result, I am well-off and powerful. Sometimes, I actually make up things to keep key people in line. You know, those who are jealous, resentful, even vengeful because of my position and ability to influence the proconsul.

Life was good. People were afraid of me. the proconsuls respected me, and I was living the good life. Then, those two Jews arrived and began teaching. They taught about a supreme god that all must answer to, even the gods and spirits of this world. They told the people that those gods and spirits were false; whose only desire was to enslave people in fear and confusion.

The current proconsul has been my biggest challenge. He is not as superstitious as the others have been and is very insightful. I don't think he has called me more than once or twice, and then he chose not to heed my advice. The frustrating thing is, that his actions are usually correct and are respectful of our culture and way of life. I am going to have to go into preservation mode and hopefully last through his time here.

At least, he has not ordered me out of the offices of the government or restricted my activities. Many want me around, and he is sensitive to that as well. And if it is a matter of culture, he does listen to my advice. But this man, Paul, he just looked at me and called me a false prophet. He looked straight at me and called me a liar and deceiver and then said I was full of deceit and trickery.

I began to protest and used all of my guile and skill to show how well I had served the proconsuls. I strove to remind everyone of the benefits of my knowledge and my access to the world of spirits. I knew that if this proconsul listened to

Paul, I was done. If those words were not denied by the current one, then I would always be considered a liar and deceiver and no longer have access to the courts. I got louder and angrier. I was gaining ground and swaying them, when Paul spoke so powerfully that it silenced everyone.

What happened next, shook me and changed my world. He called me “a child of the devil.” A perverter of truth and accused me of distorting the right ways of the Lord! (While he was saying this I was thinking, it had been a long time since I had heard that title. I am a Jew, but I had buried that deep, and as he said, I had twisted all the truth of God to suit my desires.) His next words shook me out of my dazed thoughts.

“Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time unable to see the light of the sun.” In that instant I was blind. I stumbled about calling for someone to help me, and everyone saw and knew that Paul’s words had come true. My fate was sealed, and they promptly led me out of the meeting place. I never returned, even though after a short time my sight did come back. But I wish it hadn’t. I had been so humiliated, that I wished I could die rather than have to see the faces of all those who now clearly understood how I had deceived them.

The proconsul is now a follower of the Jesus that Paul and his friend proclaimed. He is an astute man and knows the truth when he sees it. I hear that he sits and talks with those two every day, and that his ability to govern in love and kindness is having an impact on how people relate to one another.

But here I sit. They are kind to me, which makes me hate them more and more. But what can I do?

Have you ever dealt with someone who distorts the truth, tells lies and more to get what they want? Have you ever dealt with someone whose focus was to serve the devil, if not in obvious ways, but by their way of life, which reveals who is really in control?

Demetrius – Inflammatory

I am a respected citizen of the great free city of Ephesus. I also have a seat on the ruling body of the temple of Artemis. I gained that position because of all the work I do to promote the belief of Artemis and of proper sacrifice to her. Some of you may know her as Diana.

A key part of my work is in the making of shrines for Artemis. These shrines have two functions. The one type is for the worshiper to use in their acts of worship at the temple of Artemis, which you can see just behind me on the hilltop. It is a magnificent building, and there is no other temple to any other god or goddess as grand and magnificent. Did I mention that I am a member of the ruling body of the temple?

My position helps me know how many of those shrines need to be made, based on time of year, key festivals, and projections about how many supplicants will be expected. Oh yes, that reminds me, I left out one other key piece of information. I also serve as the head of the silversmith's guild. A position that allows me special benefits, one of which is deciding who is allowed to produce and how many shrines. Of course, I, as head of the guild, get a special extra allocation. This allows me to maintain my position on the ruling board of the temple, to keep the guild well informed and to avoid excess production, which causes a drop in our earnings.

The shrines used for sacrifice in the temple are generally smaller in size. The other type of shrine is one that can be purchased to take home and set up in a special niche or worship center in their homes. These are generally larger and more intricate in design. Something to bring elegance and prestige to your home.

Life was good until Paul showed up here. We had been hearing reports of a new religious group coming into the region. This is not unusual. There is always something new arriving from different parts of the world. Ephesus is a center for trade, and in general, these new ideas are helpful. They actually increase our business. When they see the temple, see the rituals, and hear the possible benefits of worshipping Artemis, they are quick to add her worship to their own rituals. Not unusual. We have a lot of syncretism, mixing of beliefs, all to be sure we cover all the bases, so to speak.

But with this man, Paul, we were hearing a totally different idea. He taught about a God who did not allow any mixing of beliefs. It seemed a bit selfish and egotistical to me. I figured it wouldn't last. No god could make the kind of guarantees that would cover all our needs and concerns.

As proof of this, we have the magician's guild. They practice the usual incantations and spells that people expect, and they are incredibly adept at adapting their practices to each situation. Somehow, they know the pecking order in the spiritual realm and know which god or spirit to call on in each situation. To make sure they don't make mistakes, they have created a number of magician's rolls to reference for this purpose. They are very valuable and highly sought after.

The most critical work they seem to be involved in is driving out demons. This work pays handsomely when they succeed. I understand that it is critical for them to know which demon is involved and which god or spirit can be called on to get the desired result. There is an especially effective Jewish family group called the seven sons of Sceva. I have watched them at work on several occasions and it is impressive. And often their clients will come to me to get a shrine of Artemis or another

god to protect themselves or their loved one from being possessed again.

Paul messed that all up. First of all, he didn't charge anything. Seems a popular line of his was "I don't have much, but what I have, I will share with you." And after speaking those words followed by, "in the name of Jesus," the person was healed, or the spirit was driven out, and the people involved started talking about receiving an incredible peace and knowledge of the truth. To make matters worse, once that happened they abandoned every other form of worship and superstition to commit themselves solely to this god.

I don't mind another magician or religion, as long as they don't affect my business. And offering something like healing, freedom from demons, and peace at no cost was going to cause a problem. I was convinced that it would, but I failed to see just how much of a problem it would be. At this point, I was not concerned, because everything he did only affected the local magicians. Its impact on my world was minimal.

Then something happened that truly unsettled me. Those seven sons of Sceva decided to incorporate some of Paul's words into their practice. You know, in the name of this god, or that spirit, come out. In this case, they used the phrase "in the name of Jesus" who Paul preaches. Generally, the demon would respond in one of two ways, it would leave, because a more powerful force had been summoned, or nothing would happen because a lesser power had been summoned. Not this time; the person being exorcised went crazy. He screamed at them "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" That was unheard of for a demon to speak and identify those involved. Not only that, the possessed man went berserk and

attacked them. He beat them so badly that, when they finally escaped, they were bleeding and naked.

That shook up the magicians, and a huge number of magicians came to Paul. They were so convinced of the truth of Paul's god and his power that they renounced their belief in magic to follow this new god. Then they brought their scrolls, built a bonfire and burned them to ashes. It was an incredible sight, and it rocked all of Ephesus. The value of those books was equivalent to \$4 million dollars!

During all this time, Paul had rented a hall and had been teaching all who wanted to be disciples of this very selfish god. They would come from all over the province to be taught and return home to tell others what they had learned. With this event, you can begin to imagine what started to happen. More and more people started to commit themselves to follow this new religion to the exclusion of all others, and that is when I became really alarmed.

What had become a minor nuisance, was becoming a serious problem. At the last meeting in the temple, I found out just how serious the problem was. The priests reported the worst attendance ever recorded, and that was during the annual festival when attendance should have skyrocketed. I finally connected the dots. We had had other slow times, you know, famines, droughts, and wars would bring a drop in numbers, because there were no funds available. We would then scale down the size of the images to keep business flowing.

This was in reverse. People had the funds and could have come to celebrate their good fortune and pay a little more to keep it going. Instead, they were abandoning my belief and absolutely ruining my business. This had to stop. I had to find a way to get rid of Paul and discredit this new religion and its

exclusivism. It was one thing to share another possible way to find direction in life, but no one had the right to declare theirs was the only way and steal away my business and livelihood.

The only thing I could think of was to organize a protest. So, I called all the members of the silversmith's guild together. I knew that they were suffering even worse than I was. Then I called all the guilds of related trades that depended on people coming to the temple of Artemis...clothing guilds, goldsmiths, food vendors, anyone that was being affected by this man, Paul, and his new belief. I knew they would come when they heard that I was calling the meeting and why. And they did.

They absorbed my words like dry sponges eager for any word, any idea that would restore their business and of course their faith in Artemis. I chose my words well, I talked about the loss of income, how this man had led astray so many in Ephesus and throughout the province of Asia. They were in my control, and then I turned on all my eloquence and played the religious card. Nothing is more powerful than accusing a person of blasphemy against your beliefs and way of life. The loss of income combined with accusations of blasphemy will allow one to turn a crowd into a weapon.

It worked, they became incensed. They burst out of our meeting hall into the streets crying, "Great is Artemis of Ephesus." As we marched through the streets, more and more joined us, until the whole city was in confusion, shouting and wanting action. I was amazed at what I had created, but I was about to have it all snuffed out.

Let me explain. Once we arrived at the central theater, which holds about 25,000 people, we were a huge crowd and more than filled it to overflowing. Everybody shouting this and that,

total confusion. I was loving it, until I realized that the one person I wanted in the midst of this crowd was not there. Then it struck me. I had lost control of the protest, and the mob was now becoming an out-of-control monster.

The first attempt to silence us didn't work. Once the crowd realized the person was a Jew, the monster began chanting "Great is Artemis of Ephesus." Louder and louder they yelled and screamed. At least one thing had happened, they were all focused on my issue. But again, I realized it was all out of control and no one could create space for reason to work and the issue to be presented.

Finally, the city clerk, our direct contact with Rome appeared. His presence made a difference and the crowd finally quieted down. He chose his words wisely but not to the effect that I wanted. You see, he stated what they all wanted to hear; stated that, yes, Ephesus is the center and guardian of the temple of the great Artemis, but his next words would prevent any action or further attempt to rid ourselves of Paul and this new faith. Instead of allowing us to present our plea, he warned, no that word is not strong enough, he threatened, no it was so much more than that. He defied us to continue and risk having charges of insurrection and public disorder brought against us and so lose our status as a free city.

Oh, those words shut the whole protest down. It was one thing to lose some business. It was another thing to lose our status and privileges under Rome, and to lose not just a little business but so much more. He further deflated everyone by reminding us that this Paul, and those who followed his faith, had not broken any laws, had robbed no one, nor had he heard them blaspheme any god much less Artemis. He knew we had no case, nothing to present.

And me, oh you should have seen the look in his eyes as he turned to me and identified me as the leader of the mob. He told me in no uncertain terms that I should disappear from his sight and not be heard of again. Then, he said, if I had a grievance that I should present it in the courts. I knew, though, from his tone and the look that he clearly would deal with me in the most severe manner, if he had even a hint that I would do so or even think about doing it.

I later learned that Paul was actually getting ready to leave Ephesus. He is now gone, and I am leaving as well. Nobody wants to have anything to do with me, and my business is bankrupt. As soon as the city clerk dismissed us, the temple leaders disenfranchised me and banned me from the temple. At the same time, the guild of silversmiths removed me as their leader and revoked my license as a silversmith.

As I pack, I am not even sure if my wife and family will want to go with me. They are so ashamed because of me. And no, they aren't staying, they can't bear the looks and ridicule. They will probably go to her family in the next province, hoping to never hear again of this day or my name spoken again.

I wanted to protect my life and my way of living, and I lost it all.

What are you willing to do to protect what you have and your way of life? How far will you go in defaming others to maintain that way of life? What is more important: your way of life or the truth?

Diotrephes – Arrogance

I have been searching for truth all of my adult life. A search that was probably based on the dissatisfaction of my parents with both the worship of the Roman gods and of the emperor as a god. They were too malicious and unpredictable. As a result, I have explored many of the religious beliefs and philosophies that seem to be appearing, in an attempt to explain life and to satisfy a person's desire for peace and joy.

I have learned so much that I have become a local expert on just about all of them. When there is a new one, I quickly learn all there is to know about it. They all seem to have one central goal. That is to establish harmony between the person and the source of truth, which may be a god, a philosophic principle, or a universal power behind all of reality. If successful, the person is blessed with a deeper understanding and an ability to order their world and prosper.

As a result of my knowledge, people would come to me with questions about which religion or philosophy was the best. My answer was usually based on the person, their way of life, and other factors. The reason for that is because of all my contact with the teachers and followers of each one, I began to believe quite strongly that they all were, in essence, the same. As a result, I was highly respected, and my business did well as a result.

They all sought to find the truth, to change their life so they could live by that truth in order to obtain a state of bliss, whether through pleasing a god, performing key rituals, or living life according to a moral-ethical structure. Partly because they all had two key things in common, they did not seek to be exclusive, and their focus was basically the same, to discover the truth and live by it. And all based on the efforts

of the person. The better you did, the greater the reward and benefit.

Imagine my surprise and possible joy when the Christians arrived with a truly unique belief structure. I had never heard of the concept of confession and forgiveness. That, and the fact that receiving the gift of truth and joy was not based on my actions, but on my submission to Jesus as Lord. If one did this, then the spirit of God would come and reveal even more profound knowledge.

I was ecstatic to learn more about this new way of thinking. I quickly joined this new group so I could be forgiven and gain access to their source of truth. All was going well, but then I began to sense a shift in my status. In this group, my knowledge of other paths to truth was rejected. In this teaching, there was only one way to truth. All the other ideas were false and must be rejected as the products of human thinking and imagination.

That meant I was no longer important as a source of information, because my information no longer had value. Everyone could receive the same access to truth. This was unacceptable! Arbitrary is what it was. Anyone could receive it. Ridiculous! All this meant the problem lay in me, not in the world around me. If this was allowed to continue, all I had learned would be a waste of time and useless in this group.

It was about then that a group of Gnostics came to our town. They claimed to be followers of this new truth but in a way that pleased me. Their concept was that, yes, forgiveness was important and confession critical, but not from the perspective of it being my fault. What was important was the fact that I was part of a material world, and that world was created in sin. Forgiveness was then about renouncing the world and

learning to use its material goods in appropriate ways. Confession was about admitting the limitations of my knowledge and seeking deeper understanding and personal exploration.

With that in mind, I began to rebuild my group of followers. They had trusted me once before, and they would again, as I brought together nicely all of my vast knowledge of the mystery faiths and philosophies and incorporated them into this new belief system. In the end, it would be superior to either one alone.

It worked, and slowly people began to be swayed to my way of thinking. We began to take control of the group, and when John sent people our way for us to help as they journeyed on to other places, we ejected them from the fellowship. Really, who was this John? He claimed to be one of the original followers, but he is an outsider, and I am not about to let him have any authority over me. To make my point clear, I evicted those who agreed to house them, took over leadership of the group, and expelled Gaius who is a personal friend of John's.

Now I am back in control, and the people are eager to hear what I have to say and find release from the material world. Their offerings come to me, and I make sure our place of worship is attractive and a place of open discussion about how to blend everything into the best way to reach god, in this case through his example in Jesus, who showed us how to live as spirit and reap the benefits of blessing.

Am I worried about what John might do? A little. I am discovering he has a better grasp of the religious and philosophical beliefs than I expected. He is step by step taking my arguments apart. At least for now I am enjoying a place of

power and ease. Let him come, and I will deal with him and his fancy words.

How susceptible are we to false teaching and false teachers? What do we need to do to protect ourselves from those who are wolves in sheep's clothing and even use our own terminology to teach their heresies?

Study Guide for the Wicked

Sometimes the best study is not of the negative word but of its antonym or opposite. Studying a negative concept can be beneficial in identifying what it is and how to identify it, but the goal of these studies is to help us grow from what we have learned. The stories help us understand the negative. The studies have the intention of helping us understand and develop a positive characteristic that, when mastered, should help a person deal with and overcome the negative quality.

Lesson 1 Cain – Jealous → Generous

In the story of Cain we see what can happen when one is jealous, when one wants what others have. Instead of being jealous, we should be generous with what we have.

Ps 37:25-26 talks about the righteous and how they live their life. What has the author observed about them? How has that affected their response to others?

Ps 112:4-9 expands on these ideas. Explain what you think the following phrases mean.

Never be shaken

Good will come to him

He will be remembered forever

How could you apply verse 9 to your life?

Consider Proverbs 12:24-26.

How does the idea of being generous affect the person and their needs?

In 2 Co 9:11, what do you think Paul means by “you will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion?” You may need to read the entire chapter to understand this statement.

What instruction does Paul give Timothy in 1 Ti 6:17-19?

What riches do you have that you can share?

What promise is given in this passage?

Lesson 2 Babel – Proud → Humble

The pride of Babel’s citizens led them to put themselves in the place of God, believing they could be above God. The opposite of this, is the word “humble.” A word that suggests knowledge of who one is and where their real value comes from.

Moses is described as a humble man in Nu 12:3. Why do you think this word is used to describe him?

Read the following Psalms and explain what they say about the humble.

18:27

25:9

147:6

149:4

Read Daniel 10:12. How does God respond to the humble?

Why would James say the humble should take pride in their circumstances in Ja 1:9?

What are we able to do when we are humble? Ep 4:2

What can we expect God to do if we are humble? 1 Pe 5:5-6

Read 2 Ch 7:14. What does God promise to do if we humble ourselves before him?

Lesson 3 Wife of Potiphar – Trap or Enslave, Seduce → Liberate, Free

This woman wanted control and was willing to use seduction as a means to trap Joseph and force him to do her bidding. Instead of enslaving people, we should be working to liberate or free them.

Read Ps 34:4-5. What does the author say about his need, and who provided what was needed?

What condition, found in Pr 11:21, will make it possible to be free?

Read Is 42:6. What is the work the Lord is giving to the person in this passage?

Now read Lk 4:18. How does this relate to the gospel we are to proclaim?

Read John 8:35-36. What does God want to make possible for us? How will He do this?

Read Ro 6:18-22. What does God seek to free us from?

What price was Paul willing to pay so others could be free? 1 Co 9:19. Apply this to your life.

Lesson 4 Pharaoh – Egotism → Humility

Pharaoh thought he was all powerful, a living God. His egotism prevented him from listening to others. He was the center of his world and everyone had to bow before him. What he needed to learn was humility and how all that he had was a gift he did not deserve.

Use the following proverbs to write an explanation of what humility makes possible. Include why you think that could happen.

Proverbs 11:2

Proverbs 15:33; 18:12

Proverbs 22:4

Rewrite Colossian 2:18-23, replacing the phrase “false humility” with “true humility.”

What does one lose with the one and gain with the other?

What actions are the result of the one, and what do they become as a result of the other?

Read Jam 3:13 and 1 Pe 5:5. What do you think the relationship is between the ideas of deeds and clothes from these two passages?

Paul gives guidelines to help us understand what one must do, in Ph 2:3-4. List and explain them.

Lesson 5 Dathan and Korah – Power → Approval

Dathan, Korah, and their followers did not like having others to be given power to control their lives. They sought to take it from Moses so they could replace him as the one with power.

But instead of opposing those called by God, we are instructed to give them our approval and enable them to serve as God has directed them.

How should our understanding of this word affect our actions? Read John 6:27 and explain a key way we can express our approval of what God is doing.

What happens when we don't seek God's approval? Read Ga 1:10.

Why was Paul so concerned that they approve his ministry? Vs 11-12

What do you think are the marks of one approved by God and a person that we should approve of as leader? Read the following texts to form an answer. Ro 14:18, 2 Co 10:18, 1 Th 2:4, 2 Ti 2:15

Lesson 6 Balaam – Fame → Duty

While in one sense Balaam did seek to become rich by his actions, another aspect of what he wanted was to gain more fame. He wanted people to know him and seek him out, because of what he could do. Being famous would bring the rest, but without fame, few would seek him or be willing to pay for his services. A key word representing the opposite of doing something in order to gain fame, is to do the same thing because it is expected of me; it is my duty.

In 2 Chronicles 23:6-8 you will see the word “duty” used many times. Explain what this word means and how it defines what the people were doing.

In the following passages in Ezra (4:13, 20, 7:24), another type of duty is described. Explain what it is and why people should take this action.

Eccl 12:13 describes another aspect of duty. Explain it and how it affects the other two types of duty, previously described.

Paul uses the word “duty” to describe his work in Ro 15:16. What is this duty, and how can you make it a part of your life?

Lesson 10 Ten Spies – Civil Disobedience → Submission

At some point in our life, we will be faced with this action by some people. We may even participate in such a protest or in defiance of the authorities. There are times when it may be right, but it represents a breakdown of truth and relationships. The Bible talks often about our need to learn submission.

What is the root cause of our inability to learn submission? Ro 8:7

Who are you expected to submit to in these passages, and why should you be in submission to them? Ro 13:1, 5, He 13:17, and 1 Pe 2:13.

What does it mean to be in submission to each other? Ep 5:21

What do we gain, if we are in submission to others? Read 1 Co 16:15-18.

Lesson 8 Achan – Greed → Content

Achan was not satisfied with what he had. He wanted more and was willing to take risks to satisfy his desire, his greed for

more. Instead of desiring more, we are told to learn to be content.

In 1 Timothy 1:6, we learn that godliness with contentment brings great gain. Read vs 7-12 and describe what you gain and can avoid because of contentment.

Read Ph 4:11-13. Explain how it is possible to be content when the following exist:

In need

Have plenty

Well fed

Hungry

In every situation

Read Mt 6:25-34.

What are the things we should not worry about? Why?

If we are truly content, what should we seek instead? What are we promised, if we will do this?

Lesson 9 Abimelech – Vain → Meek

Abimelech believed he should be in charge. He thought he was better than everyone else and killed anyone he thought would challenge him. This vanity blinded him to the consequences of his actions and how others would respond. Instead of promoting ourselves, we are told to be meek.

Read Zephaniah 3:12. Why do you think God left the meek in the land?

Both Ps 37:11 and Jesus in Mt 5:5 state that the meek will inherit the land. Why would this be possible?

Read 1 Co 1:27-28. Why would God choose the lowly or meek?

Why do the meek experience peace? Is 26:3.

Read James 2:5 and reflect on why God makes the choice mentioned in this passage.

Lesson 10 Delilah – Betrayal → Trust

Samson trusted Delilah, but she betrayed him for the sake of money and the chance to boast about how she defeated Samson, when all others had failed. We are not to betray people, but are to help them find God. This requires that people trust us.

Read 2 Ki 18:30 and Is 36:15. What did the enemy try to do here?

What is the instruction given in Pr 3:5? How would this decision affect our relationship with others?

How are trust and being faithful linked? 1 Co 4:2

Read 1 Co 9:17. What does it tell you about the importance of trust?

What test of trust do you think Paul is referring to in 2 Co 13:5? Read the entire chapter to help you answer the question.

Lesson 11 Micah – Lawless → Righteous

Micah became a law unto himself. He stole, he created his own system of worship, and then he complained when others did the same thing and he lost all he had created. We are called to be righteous. There are literally hundreds of verses that deal with this concept.

Read Ps 1:5-6 and create a definition of the concept of being righteous.

What are we told about God's relationship to the righteous? Ps 14:5, 34:15, 37:21, 97:11 (This is just a sampling of examples related to this topic.)

Where do the righteous live? Ps 140:13.

How would this affect their actions and decisions?

How do the righteous live? Ro 1:17

Why do you think the prayer of the righteous is powerful? Ja 5:16, 1 Pe 3:12

If you can, do a word search and list at least two other key things the righteous make possible.

Lesson 12 Goliath – Contempt → Respect

Goliath looked at the army of Israel and had contempt for them. His contempt for David exploded when he saw that David was a child in his eyes. In the end, Goliath was defeated by a person who was not a warrior, and the people respected David.

Why did they respect David? Read 1 Samuel 18

Read Pr 11:16 and explain why the person in this passage would gain respect?

How should respect guide our actions towards others? 1 Pe 3:7

What does it mean to show proper respect? 1 Pe 2:17

Why should we behave in a way that earns the respect of others? 1 Th 4:12

Read 1 Ti 3:8-14. What kind of actions can gain the respect of others?

Lesson 13 Nabal – Surly → Courteous, Civil

Nabal was an insensitive man, who had little concern with how he treated others. He was difficult to please and disrespectful of others, which meant he was harsh in how he treated them. We are called to be gentle.

Pr 15:1 suggests one way in which this attitude is of benefit. Why do you think such an attitude would succeed?

Jesus talks about His yoke being gentle in Mt 11:29. A yoke is designed to connect oxen to heavy burdens for the purpose of moving them. That doesn't sound very gentle. Reflect on how being connected to Jesus with a yoke would be a gentle and humble action.

How would such an action bring about rest?

Read 1 Th 2:6-9. Explain how Paul uses the concept of being gentle to describe his ministry.

Write in your own words, what Peter is trying to explain about the importance of being gentle.

Why would a person with this characteristic be of great worth to God?

Lesson 14 Witch – Exploit → Encourage

A witch is someone whose goal is to exploit everyone. This person wants to exploit the demons to gain power over others and use them to advance their own power and position. This creates fear and control. Instead, we are to focus on encouraging one another, to learn to help each other.

Paul knew the importance of this. Read Ep 6:22, Co 4:8, and 1 Th 3:2. What was Paul's goal in each of these situations? How could your presence do the same for others?

What words do you think Paul was talking about in 1 Th 4:16?

How do you think it is possible for one to rebuke and encourage others at the same time? Read 2 Ti 4:2

What power does the idea of encourage provide? He 3:13

How can we make use of this idea when we gather in worship? He 10:25

Lesson 15 Shimei – Disloyalty → Devotion, Delight

Shimei was a man who represents disloyalty. He did not delight in the one God had chosen to be king. Instead, he chose not to follow the king but attacked him in the hope that this person he hated would be destroyed. Infidelity will do that if allowed to grow in us. We are to delight in God and the members of His family.

Read Psalm 37. Explain what it means to “delight in the Lord.”

Read the following verses from Ps 119, and then explain why it is good to delight in God’s law. (16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174.

What was the reason for Isaiah’s delight in Is 61:10?

Why would/could Paul delight in the things he mentions in 2 Co 12:10?

How does God respond to those he delights in? Zeph 3:17

Lesson 16 Sheba – Rebellion → Conform

Sheba rebelled against his leader. And he sought to draw others into his rebellion and opposition to God’s will. We are told not to conform to the ideas and concepts of the world.

There are two critical scriptures that look at this concept. Read them and reflect on why one should act in the way described.

Ro 12:2

1 Pe 1:14

Scripture uses the word “transform” to present the positive aspect of this concept.

Read Ro 12:2 again and consider how conforming yourself to God’s will results in transformation.

Now read Rom 8:29 and see if what you wrote matches what is said here.

Read John 17:16-23 and expand your answer to include what you find in this part of Jesus’ prayer.

Lesson 17 Jeroboam – Syncretism → Faithful

Syncretism is about altering what you have, to make it fit what you want it to be. It is a conscious decision to be unfaithful to truth and to God. We are called to focus on being faithful to God and what he has taught us.

Read Ps 18:24-29 and describe how God responds when we are faithful.

Read Pr 2:7-8. What does God promise to those who are faithful?

What does that mean to you, and what is happening in your life at this moment?

In the future?

Read Mt 25:14-30

What does the Lord expect of those who are faithful?

What can happen to those who are unfaithful?

Read 1 Co 4:1-15. What have you been entrusted with?

Why do you need to be faithful?

Lesson 18 Jezebel – Malevolent → Compassion

One would describe Jezebel's actions as malevolent, regarding people who served the Lord. She wanted to kill all who followed God and to destroy their faith. This level of hatred is not what God wants us to learn and express. Instead, we are to learn compassion, so that people will be drawn to God.

Explain how a father has compassion on his children. Ps 103:13

How does this help us understand the compassion of the Lord and how we should behave?

Read Is 49:8-15. Use this passage to describe what compassion is and how it works.

Read the following passages about Jesus and compassion. Mt 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, Mt 20:34

Who did Jesus have compassion on and why?

Who is the person in your world and life that needs to have you respond like Jesus? How would an act of compassion affect them and help them to understand God's compassion?

Based on what you have read, how could you clothe yourself with compassion, as described in Co 3:12?

Lesson 19 Gehazi – Lying → Honest

Gehazi told a number of lies to convince Naaman to give him some of the gifts he had brought as a thank you to Elisha. All too often, we lie to get what we want or to avoid the consequences of some action. But we are called to be honest in our speech and dealings with others.

How could something as simple as the use of honest scales and weights reflect who we are and how we will treat others? Le 19:36

It is not hard to understand that God can see if we are honest, as David claims in 1 Ch 29:17. How would those around you know that you are honest about your desire to serve God?

Why do you think an honest answer is like a sweet kiss, even when it may be difficult to hear? Pr 24:26

Read 2 Co 1:12-14. How does our honesty affect others and their understanding of our relationship with God?

Another word for honest is “truthful.” Read Pr 12:18-22. Explain the following ideas.

Tongue of the wise (truthful) brings healing.

Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.

Read 2 Co 6:3-10. Explain what truthful speech in the power of God means.

Lesson 20 Athaliah – Murder → Mercy

Jesus tells us that to even think about killing someone is the same as murder. Athaliah took the next step and carried out her thoughts. When we go down this path, it is clear that we don't understand the concept of mercy.

God desires mercy and not sacrifice in Ho 6:6, Mt 12:7. What does this mean?

How would this affect your life and decisions?

Read the parable in Mt 18:22-35. What lessons about mercy are we given in this passage?

What should be our response to mercy? Ro 12:1

How do you think this will affect how you live?

Read 1 Ti 1:13. How should God's mercy towards us affect and direct our life?

Lesson 21 Manasseh – Rejection → Approval, Acknowledge

Manasseh chose to reject all he had seen and learned about God. This rejection caused him to deny God, and all those who served God were rejected. The Bible encourages us to acknowledge and confess the truth about God.

There are promises given to those who acknowledge God. Read the following passages and explain how that promise applies to you.

Pr 3:6

Ho 6:3

Ro 10:9-10

How will others respond when we confess the truth? 2 Co 9:13

When we acknowledge that the Lord is God, what should we also do? Dt 4:39

How will this affect our treatment of others?

Read Co 3:17 and 23. How do these passages provide guidance in living a life that acknowledges God?

Lesson 22 Pashhur – False → Sound, Solid

Pashhur was false in how he handled God's message. He also sought to be false in his teachings and actions towards others, including those sent by God. We are to seek sound teaching

and then proclaim it. By doing this, we establish what is true and, therefore, sound.

Several proverbs combine this word with the word “judgement.” Read them and define why they are critical in helping us live for God.

Pr 3:21-24

Pr 4:2-4

Read Pr 8:14-21 and explain the benefits of sound judgement.

What does Paul tell us to do in order to develop a pattern of sound teaching? 2 Ti 1:13-14

What is a key benefit of having teaching that is sound? Ti 1:9

What do you need to do to make this a part of your life?

Lesson 23 Sanballat – Intimidation → Persuasion

Sanballat’s goal was to intimidate people into doing what he wanted. We are called to guide and persuade people to choose to do what is right and to follow God, not their own selfish desires.

What was Paul’s goal in Ac 26:28-29?

In 2 Co 5:11-16 Paul helps us to see what is involved in persuading others. Explain the meaning of the following phrases:

Plain to your conscience

Opportunity to take pride in

Out of our mind

In our right mind

Christ's love compels

Regard no one from a worldly point of view

Lesson 24 Haman – Hatred → Love

Haman's hatred is so dominating, that he cannot see the risk it involves. In the end, it destroys him and his family. Love, on the other hand, allows a person to see clearly and even risk themselves to save others.

The heart of this ability to love is based on the command "to love God completely." This truth is first stated for us in Dt 6:5, and later Jesus uses this (Mk 12:30) to answer a question about the greatest commandment.

Read the following three texts, and explain how following the greatest commandment helps us to understand the other commandments.

Lk 6:32

Lk 6:35

Mk 12:31

Jn 13:34

We are called to lay down our lives out of love, Jn 15:13. What does this mean for you today in your life?

1 Co 13:4-8 lists a number of characteristics of love. Pick two, and explain why love makes it possible to be that kind of person.

Read Ep 3:17-19 and explain what love makes possible.

How would you make this goal the focus of your life?

How would seeking this affect your relationship with others?

Explain how love can atone for sin in Pr 16:6.

Lesson 25 Lame Man – Self-preservation → Sacrifice

The lame man in the story was more concerned about himself and was unwilling to risk becoming more of an outcast than he already was. He was unwilling to sacrifice anything, in order to know God. We are called to sacrifice ourselves and our possessions so that we may find God.

Yet we are often told that God is not interested in sacrifice, but obedience and mercy. Read the following passages and think about why this is true.

1 Sa 15:22

Ps 51:16

Pr 15:8

Ec 5:1

Read the following texts and reflect on what kind of sacrifice receives God's approval.

Ep 5:2

Ph 2:17

Ph 4:18

He 13:22

Reflect on Christ's sacrifice for you, and what you can do so others will benefit from your experience.

Lesson 26 Herods – Fear → Courage

Each of the Herods feared losing their power and position. This fear drove them to act wickedly and to destroy anything that threatened them. They lacked the courage to deal with the truth of who they were and what they were doing. We are called to be people of courage and to trust God.

Reflect on the following stories and the courage involved.

David and Goliath – 1 Sa 17

Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal – 1 Ki 18

Nehemiah and the threats of Sanballat – Nehemiah 2, 4, 6

Esther and the threat of Haman – Book of Esther

Think about what threatens your faith today. Read 1 Co 16:13, Ph 1:20, He 3:6, and explain the purpose of courage in these passages.

Read Joshua 1:7-9. What did God tell Joshua to do? What promises and advice did Joshua receive to help him have courage?

What is God's promise to those who choose to be courageous?
1 Ch 28:20

Lesson 27 Bar Jesus – Pervert, Distort, Deceive → Explain, Clarify

Bar Jesus did not want to reveal the truth. His goal was to deceive and control others. When Paul came, he revealed the truth so all could see the deception and choose correctly.

We have been given a key task in this world. Read Ga 1:16 and explain what it is.

What has God given us to help us reveal the truth to others? 2 Co 4:5

Read Ep 3:5-10.

What is the mystery that has been revealed to us?

How did God reveal this mystery to us?

What are we to do, now that we have received this revelation?

In Ep 1:17-18, Paul gives a list of critical things we must have, to be able to reveal the truth to others. List them and explain how they are important in helping you reveal the truth to others.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Lesson 28 Ananias and Saphira— Status → Servant

Ananias and Saphira were so focused on improving their status, they were willing to lie to others. They forgot that no one can lie and hide the truth from God. They misunderstood what it meant to be a servant and the importance of gaining God's approval above all else. To do that, we need to be servants.

Mt 20:26 tells us that those who wish to have true status must be servants. Why would this be seen as an act of status?

Read Mt 24:45-47. Describe the behavior and actions of a wise servant.

Why would the master give him more responsibility? What do you think that would be?

Read Lk 17:7-10. Describe the behavior of the servant in this passage.

Explain the phrase, “would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?”

In 1 Co 9:15-18 Paul talks about his role and why he serves. What can you learn from Paul about the work of a true servant and its benefits?

[Lesson 29 Demetrius – Inflammatory → Calm](#)

Demetrius tried to get the people mad, in order to get his way. He inflamed them with his words and hoped that the angry reaction of the crowd would force the leaders to do what he wanted. This may work, but it cannot last. Instead, we need to learn to be calm and to respond in peace.

Those who seek calm, or are peacemakers, are blessed by Jesus. What does he promise them in Mt 5:9?

Why would they be called this? Think about the work of Jesus and what he came to accomplish.

Read James 3:18. What is the harvest mentioned here, and why is this important?

Read Ro 12:18 and 14:17. What are we to do, and how can we do this?

What does Co 3:13 say we should do to establish and maintain peace? What do you need to do to make this possible?

What actions are we told help to establish peace in Ja 1:15?

Lesson 30 Diotrophes – Arrogant → Lowly

Diotrophes was arrogant in his treatment of John and of others. People who are arrogant show little respect for others and will use others to get what they want. We are called to be lowly.

What does Is 57:15 tell us about God's attitude toward those who are lowly?

Read Pr 16:19 and 29:23. What do these proverbs teach us about being lowly?

Read 1 Co 1:26-31.

What is God capable of doing with those who are lowly?

Why would he do this?

What does being lowly allow us to receive through Jesus?

What should we boast about? Think about what you can gain when you learn to do this?

The children are often considered to be lowly, and yet we are called to be like children. Read the following passages and explain what they teach you about the value of being lowly.

Mt 18:3

Mt 21:16

Mk 10:16

Lk 10:21