

"God's Agents of Smash is a fresh look at timeless Bible stories revealing God's relentless pursuit to love people. Ray Carman reminds us that we too act as barriers between people and God or as Agents of Smash removing barriers. Who wouldn't want to join a team of superheroes and take up the God's mission? Sign me up!" - Dean Plumlee - Christian Surfers United States and SonLife Ministry

"You might think this is a bible study guide. It's not. It's a bible doing guide. It is also a great reminder that God doesn't search the world looking for highly qualified people to do his work, He looks for available people to do His work. Smash on!" Eric Poulin - Husband, Father of 4 boys and Smasher at ForgeAndFoundry.org

Do you think it would be a good idea to lead your kids in Bible studies but feel baffled about what to do? In God's Agents of SMASH Ray Carman hands parents a tool that highlights some amazing Biblical characters--agents used by God to defeat the enemy. Share these amazing superhero stories with your kids, and in the process you too will be encouraged and exhorted to "smash down the walls between God and His people!"

Deborah Secor - editor

"Agents of Smash is full of stories of The Bible, presented in a way, that they come alive for children! Kids already identify with superheroes, and this book uses biblically accurate scenarios and stories to help them get excited about the foundation of the Christian Faith. Ray Carman has created a great teaching tool to build a foundation for a future of Bible intrigue for children.

After reading this book, I was reminded of Proverbs 22:6... Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." Jason Elkins - 100 Cups Consulting

God's Agents of SMASH

**God using ordinary people to tear down the barriers
between Him and His people.**

This entire idea began with a simple desire to do a study with my children, using Bible stories that I thought might capture the attention of my three- and five-year-old boys. They, like any young boys, are enamoured with the concept of superheroes. As I was growing up, I was captivated by comic book characters, and, just like their father, my boys fell in love with *The Incredible Hulk*®.

After watching cartoon series about the Avengers and Iron Man, the boys came upon one called *Hulk and the Agents of S.M.A.S.H.*® They sat down and watched the episodes with great enjoyment. As I watched some of the episodes with them, (I mean, what dad doesn't try to get involved in what his boys like? Or maybe part of me just liked watching the Hulk® again. Who can say for sure?), I started to notice that when all else failed these superheroes simply smashed the problem. When evil popped up in any form, Hulk and his team smashed it victoriously. Sometimes the smashing was tactical or thought out, and other times it was simply, "We don't know what else to do, so let's smash and hope it works out."

As my wife and I talked about how we could be more intentional with our Bible lessons and times with our kids, I began to think of how I might be able to do something that would reach both our boys, and also our daughters, who were 11 and 12 at the time. I was personally going through the book of Nehemiah with a friend in our weekly Bible study, when suddenly God gave me an idea.

When I finished reading the book of Nehemiah, I was amazed by what I saw in the 13th chapter. This guy who rebuilt the wall in Jerusalem for the protection of the people of God was suddenly seen throwing people out in the street, beating them, pulling out their hair, and driving them out of town! After each act of seeming violence, this same guy would ask God to “remember [him] with favor” for what he had done.

I remember the feeling I had as I read the account of Nehemiah “losing it” because sin was again separating the people from God. I thought, “Wow, God sent an agent of smash to remove the thing that’s hindering His people from being close to Him!” That’s when God planted the idea of *God’s Agents of Smash* in my mind. So, I began going through some well known, and not so well known, Bible stories with my kids, where God used an Agent of Smash to bring His people closer to Himself.

I honestly had no idea where this was going to take me, as each week I simply waited and prayed for God to show me the next Agent. I started all this for my kids, but little did I know how much this study was going to impact my life. Seeing these Agents at work in the stories, I began to realize that God will use anything and anyone to eliminate the thing or things that are separating Him from His people. Sometimes these agents were sent to smash an enemy. Sometimes they smashed religious barriers. Sometimes they smashed idols. And sometimes they smashed the very thing that was intended to draw people to God, but instead had been twisted into a barrier, separating God and His people.

What I realized on this journey was that, ever since Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God has been working to eliminate the barriers that hinder the intimate relationship He longs to have with His people. When He found Adam and Eve hiding because they were naked, God immediately went to work to

restore the relationship they had prior to eating the forbidden fruit, by supplying clothing for His children. Essentially, when Adam said, "I can't be with You because I am naked," God clothed him so he would not be ashamed to be with God. God was saying, "So you are worried about your nakedness? Here, I will supply the blood for the sin, and here are some clothes to eliminate your shame. Let's walk together again!" That has been the story of redemption and restoration from the beginning. God doing whatever it takes to restore those intimate walks He loves to take with His kids. And He has, at times, employed His own Agents of Smash to break down those barriers, so He and His beloved could take those walks together again.

What follows are the same stories that we used as a family on our journey, the same ones God used to revive a slumbering Agent - me - He had called into service many years ago!

Notice: The Incredible Hulk, Hulk and the Agents of S.M.A.S.H., The Blue Hulk and all other Marvel Characters mentioned are the property of Marvel Studios

Table of Contents:

What is an Agent of Smash	-	Page	6
Agent #1	-	Nehemiah	- Page 10
Agent #2	-	Samson	- Page 24
Agent #3	-	Gideon	- Page 33
Agent #4	-	Balaam's Donkey	- Page 42
Agent #5	-	Elijah	- Page 49
Agent #6	-	David	- Page 55
Agent #7	-	Moses	- Page 66
Agent #8	-	Satan	- Page 74
Agent #9	-	Jesus	- Page 84
The Ultimate Agent of Smash: God Himself	-	Page	92
More to the Story	-	Page	97
Points of Clarification	-	Page	109
In Conclusion	-	Page	112
Calling All Agent of SMASH to Arise	-	Page	114

I would like to thank Sara Hays for her effort in proofreading my work and a very big thanks to Deborah Secor for her tireless efforts to edit this work and make me sound much more articulate than I claim to be. Also thanks to my daughter Hailey for her work on the preliminary cover drawing and to Jack Verret for finalization of the cover and all the characters portraits for this study! All of you are amazing and I am blessed to call you my family in Christ.

*Note. All Scripture references are from the NIV unless otherwise notated.

Introduction

What is an Agent of Smash?

In all honesty, this is probably the most important questions that has to be covered before beginning this study on the Agents. The term agent is used for so many different things. Federal Agent. Rogue Agent. Real Estate Agent. Sports Agent. Players Agent. Personal Agent. Chemical Agent. This is just to name a few.

Because I grew up in the 70s and 80s, when I need a definition I turn to *Webster's Dictionary*. So I looked up the word *agent* and found this:

1. A person who acts on behalf of another.
2. A person or thing that causes something to happen.
3. One who acts or exerts power.
4. Something that produces or is capable of producing an effect.
5. A person who is authorized to act in the place of another as a representative.

However, my favorite one is this: ***“A means or instrument by which a guiding Intelligence achieves a result.”***

To me, all of these definitions play a small role in defining who and what an Agent is. However, the last one seems really to capture what these Agents of God are. They're a means by which God Himself achieves a particular result.

I think it is important to point out that these Agents act a lot like *Hulk*© and his *Agents of S.M.A.S.H.*© I readily admit I still like watching cartoons with my kids. I was raised watching cartoons and have little issue with sitting down and watching them with my girls and boys - as long as they are filled with heroes beating up

the bad guys! No girly cartoons please. And since this particular series was based around my all-time favorite superhero, *The Incredible Hulk*®, I was all the more overjoyed to watch them.

As I did my cartoon research on the Hulk® and his agents, I noticed that each time these agents go to smash, it's meant to eliminate the evil that's intended to harm the people of earth. They have to overcome many obstacles—fighting amongst themselves, seemingly insurmountable odds, and their own disbelief—to win.

But their greatest battle is not trying to save the world; it's trying to convince the world that they're there to help, not hurt. People take one look at the *Hulk*® and his team, and they are overwhelmed by fear. A monster who is filled with rage just seems scary, and people aren't usually ready to accept him. In order to "convince" the world the team is there to help, *A-Bomb*®, a.k.a. *The Blue Hulk*®, produces a live webshow showing the world all the good things *Hulk*® and his team of smashing Agents do. Time and again, *Hulk*® ends the show with an explanation of the lesson they have learned about the evil they faced and the teamwork they need to learn - and he always finishes with "Hulk Out!"

Unfortunately for the hulks, no matter what they do to prove themselves to the world and other superheroes, they are continually feared, questioned, and distrusted. At various points in the journey, *Hulk* becomes frustrated because it seems like no matter what he does, people are never going to trust him. In their eyes, he forever will be the rampaging monster that the world fears, and therefore his fall-back move is to always leap away and just disappear. This running away only allows the evil to grow, becoming more powerful. In the end, *Hulk*® and his team have to decide that they will fight the good fight, and smash all the evil they can, whether or not the world ever accepts them. In this decision, they have a new purpose: To make the world as safe as they can,

even if they never receive the thanks they truly deserve. Once they make that decision, they literally become a family that's unstoppable, when they work together.

This is a very good picture of God's Agents of Smash that we see in Scripture. These agents were sent by God to tear down a barrier that has caused separation between God and His people. God's agents were rarely appreciated for their efforts, and many times they were feared or scorned for what they had done. But they were acting on behalf of God, guided by His intelligence to produce a necessary effect: To remove all barriers that separated God and His people from each other!

Every time an Agent of Smash appeared, acting on God's behalf, something - some sin, or some person - replaced God or kept people from seeing God for who He truly is and, therefore, hindered that walk in the Garden that God desires with His people. The Bible is full of these moments, recorded throughout Scripture. If I were to do a full disclosure of every Agent of Smash there, no telling how long I would keep writing.

For this particular study, I want to focus on the ones that God led me to as I walked through this study with my kids. I will admit it will be difficult for me not to do a comprehensive study, as is my nature (I can think of several really good ones right now, even as I type), but for our purposes we'll focus on ten agents who were guided by Divine Intelligence to smash down the walls that had been put up between God and His people.

This journey will require you to read Scripture, if you want to allow the full effect of each story to do its work. It will require that you study, question, probe, discuss, and dig deeper. My first act of smashing in this book will be to tell you that a lazy approach of just reading my words and taking my opinions and words as pure truth

is ***not allowed!*** If you really want to know God in a deeper way through this study, you're going to have to work. Otherwise, this is just a bunch of words on paper that you will read and either say, "Man, that was a great new look at these guys in the Bible," or, "what a waste of time."

But if you'll allow the Spirit to speak to you as you dig in the Scripture, and grasp the meaning of what being an Agent of Smash for God really is, I believe you can come out of this like I did, saying, "Wow, what an AMAZING God who loves me so much that He would enlist the services of Agents that SMASH!"

NEHEMIAH



Agent #1 - Nehemiah - Barrier of Forgetfulness

Suggested reading: Nehemiah 13

How well I remember when this journey started. God had given me the idea to do a study with my family on these Agents of Smash, and I was wondering where to start. I had just finished going through a study in the book of Nehemiah with a friend, and I was struck by how this guy was himself an Agent of Smash. I know that doesn't seem to fit - after all, Nehemiah is best known as The Builder of the Wall! However, when I read the last chapter in this little book, Chapter 13, I was both shocked and elated at the same time. Somehow I had missed this part of his story all these years.

Now, for this to make sense to you, the reader, you are going to have to read the book of Nehemiah yourself. So, stop here and go read it. No, seriously, go read the whole story! I'll wait.

What took you so long? Just Kidding.

So, now that we have that behind us, I can scan over the story and get to the smashing. Nehemiah was just an ordinary man. He had been carried off to a foreign land as a slave by the conquering king, like so many others in his country. While there, he had been given the duty of being cupbearer to the king. This was a very important job. The cupbearer was responsible for tasting drinks in the sight of the king, and if he did not croak over, then the king would drink what was in the cup. It was a pretty important job and one in which you became good friends with the king.

This is where we pick up Nehemiah's story. We see him talking to some of his countrymen about the condition of his

homeland, Jerusalem, something we all do when we've moved away from our birthplace. If we run into someone from back home, we would probably ask, "How are things in (fill in the town)?" The answer - if negative, as it was for Nehemiah, would probably bring us to weep like he did. He heard that the city was in shambles because there was no wall around it to defend it. Therefore, any foreign enemy who wanted to plunder the town and its people could do so. What a devastating piece of news.

So, what did Nehemiah do? He prayed! He went to his Heavenly Father and asked for favor before "this man" (referring to the king, in Nehemiah 1:11). He asked that he would be allowed to go and rebuild what was down, but only after he basically prayed, "I have sinned, my family has sinned, and we your people have sinned and that is why the wall is down!" (this is found in Nehemiah 1:6-7. There is a whole message in those words alone and talking about the wall, but that is not what we are here to discuss today.)

Long story short, Nehemiah asked for favor in the sight of the king, which God granted. The king also provided the supplies to rebuild the wall, and Nehemiah was given an armed escort back to his home country, so that no one would hinder the journey or what he was sent to do. Once back, Nehemiah went to work with the people, leading them to rebuild the wall. He faced mockery, resistance, threats on his life, and opposition in the work. But God did it, and they finished the entire wall in 52 days. Once they finished with the outside wall, Nehemiah brought in Ezra the prophet to read the law to the people so they could remember their God and return to a life of obedience to Him.

Reading this part (chapter 8), I was blown away by how far the people were willing to go in order to return to holy obedience to God's law. It says that some had married foreign wives and had children with them. Once they heard that this was against God's

law, they sent the wives and their own kids out, removing them from the nation in order to purify the land. They realized how much they had disobeyed and immediately repented (turned) - and there was evidently no cost too high. All idols were removed; all unrighteous acts were stopped. The temple was set back up and put into working order. People again could be in a close relationship with their Creator! The scene was amazing, one that evoked celebration and joy.

Nehemiah stayed and judged (watched over) the people for a period of years before keeping his original promise to the king, returning to his post as cupbearer. However, after several years had gone by, Nehemiah decided to go back home and see how things were in Jerusalem. Remember, when he left, all things were in order, and people were continuing to obey God. But when he returned, he found a disturbing sight. That is when the Agent of Smash appeared!

Nehemiah was looking forward to seeing the homeland he loved so much. He was excited to see the progress the people had made in rebuilding the city, making it into the home he remembered. What he found was a little different.

The first three verses of Nehemiah 13 are a reminder of that time when the law had been read by Ezra, how the people had removed all women of foreign descent from the nation. (Not sure this is something the Institution of Christianity would approve of, but here it appears to be what pleased God). Then, in verse four, we start to hear of something one of the priests did that was not so good. The priest, Eliashib, had a good friend named Tobiah. Evidently, Eliashib thought it prudent to clean out one of the storerooms in the temple that had been set aside to hold the grain offerings that were used to help those who were hungry or whose crops had failed that year and nomads passing through, a.k.a. the

poor. He also had removed the temple articles, incenses, the tithes of grain, new wine, and oil that was meant to feed the Levites who worked in the temple, the singers, and the gatekeepers. Evidently, the priest figured it was no big deal to misuse this room in the effort to help out his buddy. Nehemiah thought otherwise.

Nehemiah 13:8 reads, “I was greatly displeased and I threw all of Tobiah’s household goods out of the room!” Let me give you my modern day translation: “I was so irate, I got fighting mad and literally tossed this guy’s stuff out in the street and put the room back like it was suppose to be!” I hope you can grip what Nehemiah is confessing here! He said he got angry. REALLY ANGRY! So mad that, like a scorned woman who tosses all her former lover’s stuff out of the second story window into the street, Nehemiah picked up all of this guy’s stuff and threw it out, not caring if it was broken or not. He didn’t march in nicely and order a moving company to tenderly put Tobiah’s stuff outside the temple. No, he just admitted that he threw it out.

I call this Stage One of this Smasher’s anger!

Stage Two begins when, because of the priest’s choice, the Levites were no longer in the temple taking care of it as they were commanded to do. The offerings were meant to be their food and drink, but they were tossed out so a guy could have a roof over his head. They had gone back to the fields to work, abandoning their posts, once again providing for their own needs. Nehemiah was not happy. In Nehemiah 13:11 we see that he rebuked the officials for abandoning their post!

Now, this is where I wish I could stand in front of you and give you a demonstration of a rebuke. Have you ever been properly rebuked? I mean, rebuked by someone who was upset? If not, it might be hard for you to grasp what Nehemiah did here.

I have a fairly loud voice. My wife often asks me to quieten down in public places because she says I'm naturally too loud. I decided to use my natural gift of a loud voice to teach my kids what a proper rebuke looked like. In the Message translation (13:10-13), it says Nehemiah called them on the carpet regarding their failure. So, I painted the picture for my kids of a Sergeant in the army getting on to a soldier who's done a lackluster job in his duties. He doesn't grab his hand and gently tell him he messed up. No, he gets in their ear and YELLS at them! My kids were startled when I yelled at the top of my lungs while standing nose to nose with them. (by the way, this was only to illustrate the point, not really to yell at them!) This is exactly what we have going on in these verses.

Remember, Nehemiah was already upset! He had just tossed a guy's household furniture and goods out in the street, so he already had a fire in his belly. Then he discovered that these guys had abandoned their posts, and he was angrier than before. He yelled at them, commanding them to return to their posts, saying in Nehemiah 13:11, "Why is the house of God neglected?" He was upset that they had decided that their own well being was of greater importance than taking care of God's dwelling place. So he yelled at them and then set up new leaders that were trustworthy and wouldn't deter the people from being with God like Eliashib had done.

Stage 2 Anger appears in this Agent of Smash, which was followed by a prayer. Nehemiah asks God to remember him for what he's done for God and His house - which is the place God set up to dwell with His people.

In verse 15, Nehemiah notes that some of the men were out treading grapes in the winepress on the Sabbath. In addition to

that, they were working the fields and bringing in their goods on the Sabbath. Even worse, men from another nation who were living in the town were selling their goods on the Sabbath. Nehemiah again rebukes them, saying , *“What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn’t your ancestors do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”* (Nehemiah 13:17-18)

Again, let me remind you about what it means to rebuke someone. This wasn't some calm and collected man just saying words. His voice was raised and his tone was angry! He was saying, “Don’t you understand, this is what got us separated from God and our home country before! Why are you doing this again?” Oh, Nehemiah was extremely upset, the words flowing from his mouth like molten lava, but he didn't stop there.

In Nehemiah 13:19 we see that his rebuke possibly fell on a few deaf ears or just some rebellious hearts. Nehemiah then stationed men at the gates, instructing them to shut the gates in the evening before the Sabbath so none could enter or leave. However, some of the hard-headed merchants still came and spent the night outside the gate, planning on selling their goods on the next day. Nehemiah, his wrath bubbling out, said, “I am *warning* you. If you spend the night outside these gates again on the Sabbath, I will lay my hands on you!”

Now, old Nehemiah wasn't referring to placing his hands on them to pray over them or impart wisdom. This isn't like laying hands on the sick and making them whole. No! This *laying hands on* is more like “I'm going to beat the snot out of you and force you to stop doing what you're doing!” Seems like they believed him, because Nehemiah 13:21 says that they no longer tried to do

business on the Sabbath. They had probably heard what he did to the guy living in the temple, and how he'd put the Levites straight.

Stage Three attained. The inner hulk had awakened!

As I was reading this, I have to admit something inside of me began to stir. I found myself getting excited about what Nehemiah was doing. This kind, gentle, humble man who had prayed to God and asked for favor to return and restore a wall for his people and hometown was now showing a fiery side. It was visible a little in the middle of the story when his enemies were mocking or attacking and trying to kill him, but he never 'turned green' and erupted.

However, the demeanor of Nehemiah started changing because the enemy was no longer on the outside trying to stop a wall from being built. The enemy was now on the inside, once again corrupting the people of God, and he knew that this would again lead them to the separation of God and His people. That's why he again prayed in Nehemiah 13:22, *"Remember me for this also, Oh my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love."* He didn't repent for being upset. He didn't repent for threatening these men with bodily harm. No, he asked God to remember him and show mercy to him for being an Agent of Smash.

Now, if that were it, we would have a really good story, but old Nehemiah was not finished. There was something that drove him even further into a rage and brought out his inner Smash Agent even more.

In Nehemiah 13:23, he tells us about how the men of Israel had again married some foreign women. Not only that, they had married women from the very country God had told them to never

intermingle with (Deuteronomy 23:3-6). The women had come in and seduced the men into marrying and having families. To twist the knife just a little more, some of the kids from these marriages spoke only the language of their mothers. They couldn't even converse in the language of the people of Israel. When Nehemiah saw this, his top literally blew off! Listen to his own words:

“I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.” (Nehemiah 13:25)

Oh yeah, that's one calm, cool, and collected individual (heavy sarcasm). Nehemiah had finally had enough. He admits that he lost it and, like a crazed lunatic, he went off. If you were a bystander watching this scene, you probably would have dubbed Nehemiah a “crazy old coot!” He'd passed the stage of rebuking and yelling at them. He'd gone beyond the warnings that he might lay hands on them. He was in full-on assault mode! He grabbed these men, he called curses down on them—not something I want done to me—and then he proceeded to beat them and pull out their hair.

Have you ever been in a real fight? Like a knock-down, drag-you-out fight? I have. I am, after all, the youngest of two boys who were born within a year of each other (362 days, as a matter of fact!). So yeah, I've been in some real doozies growing up. The most grueling ones were in our teenage years when I finally built up the courage to fight back. Man, if we got into it, all bets were off. And yes, I've had my hair pulled and chunks removed in a fight, and that *hurts!*

What this scene must have looked like. Can you imagine this man being so enraged about this grievous act of rebellion that he felt compelled to literally put the smackdown on these guys? This was no show. This was not entertainment. This was a guy so

enraged by what he saw that he *beat* these men and yanked out chunks of their hair! (I bet these guys' wives were just thrilled to see their hubbies with sudden bald spots—I can say this because I'm bald!)

However, I want to temper this point with the reason Nehemiah seemingly lost his mind. His actions are explained in Nehemiah 13:26-27. In essence, he tells the people of Jerusalem, “Don't you remember Solomon? He was the wisest king in all the land. There was none like him, and he was loved by God. However, it was marriages like these that caused Solomon to sin. He was led into the sin of worshiping other gods by these foreign women he married. Must we again hear that you're doing the same thing, bringing this terrible wickedness into our homeland? Don't you remember why we were punished by God and separated from Him before? Don't you remember it was because of acts of wickedness like these that we were carried off from our homeland?”

Then Nehemiah made them take an oath that they would never again marry women they were forbidden to take as wives. Not only that, he made them promise they wouldn't allow their sons to marry foreign women or allow their daughters to marry foreign men. Of course, it was *after* beating them up that he made them swear to this oath.

Stage Four now conquered. The beast had been unleashed!

There's one more level that Nehemiah attained before our story is over. It's the final part of the above story, where we see the Agent of Smash at full development. Not only had the men of Israel involved themselves in unholy matrimony, but the grandson of the high priest had married the daughter of Sanballat

(mentioned by name). Now, you may ask why this is such a big deal, this particular guy. However, if you read the story as I suggested up front, you would know that Sanballat was the number one enemy of Nehemiah. When they first came to rebuild the wall, Sanballat led the mockers that pointed and made fun of the people while they worked, trying to discourage them. Once the wall was halfway up, Sanballat tried to lure Nehemiah out to have him killed. He threatened to tell the king that Nehemiah was planning a rebellion, and amassed an army, threatening to attack the workers on the wall. Sanballat had free reign to come and go into the city of Jerusalem before the wall was built. When the wall was finished, Sanballat and the other enemies of the city were afraid. Why? Because they no longer had free access to the city or the people. They could no longer control the situation.

Then the high priest's grandson had the audacity to marry Sanballat's daughter, the very man who sought to destroy Jerusalem and hold all its citizens in fear! Nehemiah and the people had built the wall, purified the sin, and raised up defenses against the enemy. But Sanballat had been given free access to come and go as he pleased because his daughter was now a member of Israel.

Enter the final phase of Nehemiah's transformation from *Builder of the Wall and Restorer of his Homeland* into a massive Agent of Smash.

Nehemiah said simply, "I drove him away from me!"

Let me set the scene again. Nehemiah had just finished beating up and pulling the hair out of the men who had married foreign women. He had called curses down on them and rebuked them, and after beating them, he made them swear they would

never intermarry with these women again. To say the least, Nehemiah was *enraged!*

Then, in his rage, he turned and saw the daughter of his greatest enemy standing next to her husband, the family of the priest—the very family that's supposed to be setting an example for everyone. The worst part was that this girl's dad, Sanballat, was now free to go in and out of the gates around the wall as he pleased. This man wanted to destroy Jerusalem. He used to oppress the citizens who lived there while the wall was down. He mocked them, and they lived in fear of him. This man actually tried to *kill* Nehemiah himself! So, when you read, “I drove him away from me,” this was not some simple six word sentence, but rather a confession.

Nehemiah did not just beat this boy and pull out his hair. He beat him and beat him. Like another man in the Bible, he probably made some sort of whip and whipped this boy through the streets. If the boy couldn't walk anymore, I bet Nehemiah grabbed a fist full of hair and dragged him through the streets to the edge of town, with his wife and family, expelling them from the city, never to let them return. Once you've been expelled, you are *never* again allowed to come back! That's what Nehemiah meant when he said, “*I drove him away from me.*” Nehemiah once again purified the town and prayed, “*Remember me with favor, O My God!*”

Let me wrap this story up. When we read it in the Scriptures, this is the final picture of Nehemiah, God's Agent of Smash. This is a guy who had caused some damage to the people. He asserted himself and in some cases appeared to have lost himself in a fit of rage, not actually something we want to imitate, unless we understand the *why* behind the seeming madness. Thankfully, we're given that in Nehemiah 13:17-18:

“What is this wicked thing you are doing, desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn’t your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city?”

And again in Nehemiah 13:26-27:

“Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?”

To sum it up, the reason Nehemiah lost it was because he knew the reason that the wall and the city had been destroyed the first time. He remembered the long years of being separated from not only his home country, but from the Temple, God’s House. His heart broke remembering how great the distance seemed and the great burden of being separated from God and his people. He remembered the joy that overwhelmed them all when God answered their cries and allowed them to return home to rebuild the wall and the city, and the inexpressible joy found in the reading of the law and the purifying of their sins, so they once again could live in the City of God. Remembering all this, he lost his composure when he saw his people so quickly returning to the very things that had brought the barrier (distance) between them and their Heavenly Father (God) the first time. He simply couldn’t understand why they had so quickly forgotten, and he knew that the anger of God was surely building, and that if nothing was done, it wouldn’t be long until they were again driven from their home, and thus from being close to God Himself. The city of Jerusalem represented the place where God had made His permanent home

among His people, the Israelites, and Nehemiah never again wanted his people to forget and have to endure the misery that such a separation brings. Therefore, he was not afraid to be God's Agent of Smash.



Agent #2 - Samson - Barrier of Pride

Suggested Reading: Judges 13-16

Oh, we all know the story, or at least the basics of it, about this guy who had long hair and did phenomenal acts of strength while he lived. He did all kinds of amazing feats of strength and caused people to fear him. Then one day, he had his hair cut, and that was the end of his mighty reign. Sadly, that's about all that people today know about the story. There's so much more to this Agent than just a beginning, middle, and end. To really understand it, you again are going to have to take the time to read the four chapters mentioned above. If you don't, what I have to say will be just the same as knowing the beginning, middle, and end. So, *go read it*, then come back!

Now that you've read the story, I think it's pretty evident that this guy is an Agent of Smash. His life is riddled with amazing feats of strength. However, I believe it's important to stop and remember why he was doing all these things. The reason can be found in the very first verse of Judges 13.

“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.”

You see, a barrier had once again been added between God and his people. A very common theme in the Old Testament tells us that the Israelites would repeatedly do something to bring further separation between themselves and God. We know that the days and times of Samson followed Moses, so it might be important to understand what *being with God* looked like then.

In the days and times of Moses, God had declared that He would come live with His people in a tent. Yes, God made a place where He would dwell among His people, in the ark of the covenant inside the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was a movable structure that the priests could erect wherever the people went, as they traveled to the promised land. So, to *be with God* one could travel to the tent and *enter into His presence* through an act of atonement, which was the sacrifice done by the priest.

These rebellious people, the Israelites, kept making things more difficult for themselves. They loved having God on their side, knowing He lived among them. But there was a curtain between them and God, and when they “*did evil in His sight*” (Judges 13:1) they kept adding *layers* to the separation. Their evil further separated God and His people, partly because He would send a foreign people, like the Philistines, to punish them, causing the gap to grow.

Typically, a foreign nation, once they conquered a land, would remove anything that resembled the god of the conquered nation and replace it with their own god. It was the ultimate form of humiliation to the people they had beaten, a way of converting the people, forcing them to worship a foreign god instead of the One True God. If they convinced the conquered land to accept that religion, then they would, in essence, forever rule that land through their religious beliefs. So when Samson arrived on the scene, the people of Israel had been under this tyranny of the Philistines for 40 years.

When God saw that the people were so utterly far from Him, He chose to send one of His Agents to tear down the barrier of separation that was now between Him and His people. As only God can do, He chose a woman who was unable to have a child and sent an Angel to her to let her know she was going to have a

baby and he would be a Nazirite (meaning separated to God's service). This came with several restrictions (found in Numbers 6), starting with what his mother was forbidden to drink or eat while she was pregnant.

Now, I just want to point out up front that what strikes me about Samson is his ungodliness. From birth, he was set apart as a Nazirite, and if you look at his life, the only part of the Nazirite vow Samson kept was about not shaving his hair. This guy was *not* one you would say lived a pure life. Despite his lifestyle, it says in Judges 13:25 "*the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him,*" the story of his life.

Samson evidently had a distaste for the Philistine people, which is understandable considering the Israelites were enslaved to them. However, Samson took a liking to a Philistine woman and asked for her hand in marriage. In Judges 14, we read of the first times that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson and allowed him to do some mighty things. He slew a lion with his bare hands, but also broke the Nazirite vow by touching a dead body. Then, when the men of the town at his wedding forced his wife-to-be to trick him into giving up a secret, he killed thirty Philistines to pay his debts, again breaking his vow.

From there, it's one amazing story to the next. Discovering that his Philistine wife had been given to a friend in marriage, he decided to enact revenge on them. He caught 300 foxes, tied their tails together, and sent them out through the crops of the Philistines to destroy their food. Stop just a minute and think this through. The guy went and caught 300 foxes! *Do you know what that would take?* How can one man capture 300 foxes? I have trouble catching my tame dog, much less catching a wild fox. Then, when the Philistines killed his wife and her father, thinking that would appease Samson, he just got angrier and killed them,

as well. He went on a rampage, tearing through the town and slaughtering those men who had attempted to please him, again breaking his vow as a Nazirite.

Well, the Philistines couldn't let this act of rebellion stand without punishment. If they did, then the Israelites might actually start thinking about rising up against them and demand their freedom. So they sent out their army to capture and kill this rebellious man. Long story short, this did not end well for the Philistines, as Samson killed a thousand men with a jawbone of a donkey. This Agent of Smash had some sort of flare! Everything he did was beyond human. Catching 300 foxes, killing thirty men for clothes, killing a lion with his bare hands, slaying a thousand men with a jawbone, and then in Judges 16 we find him picking up the gates to a city and hauling them off on his back up a hill! This guy constantly did things that were simply unimaginable. Every time we read of one of these things happening, it's accompanied with this fact, "*The Spirit of the Lord Came upon him.*" In other words, the only reason Samson could do these smashing things is because God's Spirit would overcome him, and he would act as God's Agent.

God was up to something: eliminating the barrier of the Philistines from His people. The Philistines had oppressed and led the people into the servitude of Dagon, their false god, and God was ready to have His people back. However, this particular Agent's story did not have a fairytale ending.

Samson had a weak spot in his life. He was a proud man who fell in love with women he was not supposed to. One of God's first laws for His people said they were not to marry women from other countries because these women would always bring along their idols and false gods. It was a simple rule, and all they had to do was obey.

Samson was supposed to be even more set apart. He had been set aside to God's service since birth; however, Samson constantly abused, broke and bent the rules. He became conceited and proud in his own heart, thinking his service to God had made him untouchable. Heck, if I had done all he did, I'd probably start to believe I was invincible, as well!

However, Samson made the mistake of falling again for a woman that he wasn't supposed to, Delilah. Amazingly, he even knew she was trying to help the enemy, but he had grown so proud he figured that nothing would ever stop him. He had become something of a rogue agent, who no longer thinks the rules apply to him. Before long, Samson made the ultimate mistake, and was captured by the enemy, losing his strength. What hurts my heart the most is how, all through his story, every time he did some amazing act of strength, we're told that "*the Spirit of the Lord came upon him.*" In the end, however, he wasn't aware that the Spirit of the Lord had *left* him. He began to think he could do everything in his own strength and that he no longer needed God.

Now, I want to take a minute and point out something here. Samson was no idiot. In fact, he showed he was rather smart with his riddle to the Philistines earlier in his life (when he killed the thirty men for their outfits). However, because Samson had broken every Nazirite vow and hadn't seen any real punishment for it, he started to think his power was in his control. He thought he no longer needed God to be the redeemer of Israel. So, when Delilah started asking how he might be beaten, he told her lies. Interestingly enough though, every time he awoke, what he had told her to do, she had done. Samson knew she would cut his hair if he told her, but he no longer cared because he assumed he no longer needed it. In his arrogance and pride, he awoke and

thought he would do what he had always done—beat the Philistines!

Well, if you read the story (and I hope you did), you already know that the Philistines captured Samson and took him to prison. Back in those days, if you captured an amazing warrior, you wouldn't kill him, rather you made an example of him by humiliating him in front of everyone. This was done to tell all the other potential rebels, "If you mess with us, this is what we'll do to you!" That's what the Philistines did with Samson, the mighty Agent of Smash. They poked out his eyes and put him to work doing the chores of a woman, working at the grinding wheel. They made a fool of him and mocked him and his God. However, *in their pride* they also forgot about the symbol of strength, his hair.

Samson was told that as long as his hair was not shaved, he would be unbeatable. Once he lost his hair, he was nothing more than a man. However, as the Philistines were mocking, laughing, and partying, they didn't notice his hair growing back. So, in the midst of one of their celebrations to their god, Dagon, (the one whom they had forced God's people to worship, becoming a barrier between Him and His people), they called out Samson to basically make fun of him. In Judges 16:25, we see that Samson did what they wanted, putting on a show for them. However, God had greater plans.

You see, on that day, the rulers of the Philistines were gathered, and God had secretly infiltrated their ranks with his Agent of Smash. Although this Agent was battered, bruised, and defeated, God had perfectly placed His Agent in the right place for the right time. In the middle of the noise of the party to worship their god, Samson asked a servant to lead him to the pillars that supported the temple. People were laughing and mocking him.

They were enjoying their moment watching their once-mighty enemy reduced to nothing before them.

Then, the once-roguish Agent, the once proud and arrogant Agent, remembered who he was and what he was born to do. He remembered Who was the source of his mighty deeds and acts, and this once mighty man turned to his God and prayed:

“Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.” (Judges 16:28)

Then, our Agent gave himself over to be the bearer of God’s strength once again, and he pushed with all his might, as the temple came crashing down upon him and all the rulers of the Philistines. In that one moment, we’re told that he killed many more Philistines in his act of service unto death than in all the mighty acts while he lived. He finally remembered that his life was to be one of sacrifice to God and service to Him instead of a parade of stories about himself.

Now, why do we add this man to the stories of the Agents of Smash? Simple, because we need to remember that when God sends an Agent to remove the barrier (people, thing, or another god) that has separated Him from His people, He will in fact make that a reality. God doesn’t waste His Agents, nor does He intend that they will get the glory. God wanted the world to know He was the one who had rescued His people, though Samson in his pride was trying to take the credit himself. However, in the end, God didn’t forget Samson, nor did Samson forget his God!

It was when he remembered his purpose, humbling himself to God’s service, that he was able to tear down the very thing that was keeping God and His people from having intimate fellowship,

the Philistines. God wanted His people back so badly that He infiltrated the army of His enemy with His best Agent of Smash living in that day, and then He destroyed the people who were between Him and His people!



Agent #3 - Gideon - Barrier of Fear

Suggested Reading: Judges 6-8

I absolutely love the story of Gideon. I mean, what young boy isn't enthralled by a story about a guy and a small group of warriors beating a huge army? After all, that's a whole lot like The Incredible Hulk©. Every time you see the Hulk, he's up against insurmountable odds, yet with his incomparable strength, he always wins the battle. Isn't that the story of Gideon?

It never ceases to amaze me how we can remember a story but somehow forget the details. I've heard of Gideon's 300 ever since I was a child, but when he came up as our next Agent of Smash, I was blown away by what I saw.

Now, we have to set the scene for just a minute again. We're at a time just prior to Samson in the history of the Israelites, when Israel doesn't have a king or a ruler. God was still living in a tent among His people, and Israel always seemed to be making major mistakes. In Judges 6:1, the beginning of Gideon's story, we read that they had *again* done evil in the sight of the Lord. It says, *"For seven years He gave them into the hands of the Midianites."*

Just to set the stage a little more, things were so bad for Gideon and all of Israel during this time that they literally hid themselves in caves and clefts on mountainsides. Every year, the Israelites would come out and plant crops, hoping to eat the fruit of their labor, and every year, this swarm of Midianites would come and trample all the crops to the ground and live on the land as if it were theirs. This happened every year for seven years. It was so bad that people were starving, and when it says they were impoverished, it means that they had almost nothing. The Israelites were exhausted, starving, and desperate to be free

again. We're told that when the Israelites cried out for help, God answered them:

“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. I said to you, ‘I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ But you have not listened to me.” (Judges 6:8-10)

Enter the story of Gideon. The very next scene is one in which Gideon was called to be an Agent of Smash. But where did the angel of the Lord find this Agent? *Hiding!* That's right, Gideon was hiding out in a winepress. He was in there trying to provide for his family without the enemy finding out about his food stash. Amazingly, the greeting he got from the Angel was, “Hello Mighty Warrior, the Lord is with you!” How can someone who's hiding out be a Mighty Warrior? I thought warriors were brave and strong, never afraid of their enemy. That's not where we find this 'Mighty Warrior.' He wasn't attempting to save his people. Nope, this Agent of Smash was hiding, hoping not to be found!

From the first moment we meet Gideon, we see his fear. His response to being called a mighty warrior was something like, “Who, me?” Gideon was not at all interested in becoming a savior for his people. He was interested in simply surviving. In fact, he rebutted the Lord's initial greeting by saying, “If God is with us, then why has he abandoned us and left us in the hands of the Midians?” Honestly, Gideon wasn't really in agreement with the Lord, but that's because the Agent of Smash was looking at things from the wrong perspective.

God, however, did not simply give up on this unwilling Agent, but rather He pressed him on, saying, *“Go in your strength and save Israel, am not I here with you?”* To which Gideon again has a rebuttal. He says, *“My clan is the weakest of all the tribes of Israel and I am the weakest of my family.”* Excuses, excuses—God was having none of it. He saw an Agent of Smash, and He was going to have Gideon smash down this barrier, the Midianites, so He pressed Gideon until he agreed to obey. However, Gideon agreed to obey *only* if he had a sign. Typical of an Agent who's afraid, always wanting proof that God meant what He said. That sign was given in Judges 6:19-23.

God had a sleeper-Agent in Gideon, and now he had awakened that Agent to remove the Midianites from His people. God wanted this barrier removed so His people would know He was right there with them. But first, Gideon had to do a smaller act of smashing before the Midianites could be taken out. He had to remove the idols, Baal and the Asherah pole that had been set up by his father. So, our brave Agent (and this is sarcastic, due to verse 27) obeyed and removed the idols as he was commanded to do.

This is where the story gets exciting. We see God tell Gideon to gather his troops and prepare to eradicate the Midianites from the land, so our somewhat tentative Agent of Smash called together all of his troops. When the number is counted, we see he has 32,000 men (this number is garnered from Judges 7:3). The only issue here is that he was facing an “innumerable” amount of people (Judges 6:5). Later, we see that there were about 135,000 swords/soldiers there for Midian (Judges 8:10), so our Agent of Smash showed again that he was extremely concerned about this overwhelming task at hand. With 32,000 men facing an army of 135,000, that meant each man had to defeat 4.2 men in order for Israel to win. Ever the seeker of

proof that God was really planning on giving him the victory, Gideon did his famous test with a fleece.

Gideon showed us earlier, in Judges 6:17-24, that he wasn't absolutely certain it was God who was talking to him. Once that was proven to him, you'd think an Agent of Smash would have been all in, but when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, he again asked God for a sign to prove that He truly would “*save Israel by his hand*” (Judges 6:36-38). Once God passed his test, Gideon turned around and asked for proof again, in the form of God doing the opposite of what was done the night before (Judges 6:39-40). Gideon wanted to be certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God was really going to do what He said. Once he was certain, Gideon was ready to move forward.

Only thing is, God wasn't. God didn't want merely a good story to come from this act of Smashing. He wanted an amazing story. So, *after* Gideon had his proof that God was going to keep His word, God decided to whittle down the army a little. He told Gideon to send home all the men who were afraid. Gideon had shown signs of fear in asking for proof over and over, but he stayed despite the fear. However, 22,000 of his men left in one day because they were afraid. So now we've gone from a 4:1 ratio in battle to a 13.5:1 ratio. Honestly, the odds were looking stacked against Gideon and his men, but Gideon pressed on.

At this point, God showed a deeper level of His desire to glorify Himself. As a friend of mine says, “Every now and then, God likes to show off!” This must have been one of those moments. He told Gideon that he still had too many men, and this time He took the number down to only 300 remaining men. Our ratio had gone from 13:1 all the way to 450:1. That means that Gideon and every one of his men had to beat 450 Midianites *each* in order to win this battle!

Impossible is the word for this situation. One man against 4 is plausible. One to 13, maybe, but, one on 450 is flat out ridiculous. There was *no way* Gideon could win, at least from man's point of view, and that's how God wanted it. He had a reason for making this a *Mission: Impossible!*

In Judges 7:2, God essentially told Gideon, "I don't want Israel to ever say that it was by their own strength that they won this battle!" If I were Gideon, at this point I'd say, "Well God, I know you wanted to make a statement, but are you sure you haven't maybe overdone this?" We see fear gripping this Agent of Smash again.

God tells his Agent, in Judges 7:9-12, that it's time to smash. However, it's clear that this 'Mighty Warrior' was afraid because his logical mind had taken over. So, God told him if he was afraid, and needed another sign, he should go down to the Midianite camp and there he would find one. The key ideas here are *if you're afraid, then go down*. What happened next? Gideon went down to the camp, showing again his lack of trust and overwhelming fear that he was going to fail. Thank goodness God already had a very deep knowledge of His chosen Agent and had prepared another sign for him!

Most everyone has a basic grip on the rest of the story. Gideon heard two Midianites discussing a dream in which, again, God established that He was going to follow through on His promise. This time, He even had Gideon's name put in the explanation of the dream, in which a loaf of bread came off the hill and knocked down the tent of the camp of Midian. The interpreter of the dream said, "This must be the sword of Gideon, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites into his hands!" When Gideon heard this, he finally was filled with the courage necessary to follow

through in obedience what God called him to do. So, at last, our Agent of Smash moved into action, and took his 300 men and smashed the jars over their torches, blew their horns, and yelled, “For the Lord and for Gideon!” Then, they simply watched! Yes, they *watched*.

That night, as they smashed the jars, revealing their torches, and blew horns and yelled, chaos unfolded in the camp of the Midianites. They turned on one another in the dark, and it says that they simply slew each other. Now, picture that for a moment.

You're dead asleep. Suddenly, you hear a loud noise coming from three sides of the camp, the sound of trumpets being blown. Something inside says to grab your sword and run. Then, you hear a war cry, “*For the Lord and for Gideon!*” (Yell this at the top of your lungs, and see what everyone around you does. I bet they jump!) You suddenly see another figure next to you with a shadow of a sword in his hand, so you begin to fight. You fight and fight, all night long. All around you is chaos, and you're desperate to survive. As you're running toward your homeland in the dark, you kill anyone in your path, thinking they're your enemy. When the sun rises, you turn and realize, all night long you've been killing your friends, neighbors, family members—your own countrymen! As this settles into your mind, you keep running, thinking the whole way, “What just happened?”

Meanwhile, Gideon, our Agent of Smash, watched from the sidelines as the whole army of Midian imploded on itself. Suddenly, something in Gideon said, “Go after them!” But, before running after them, he sent a message to all of his fellow countrymen saying, “God has delivered the Midianites into our hands, get up and help us finish them off.” Judges 8:10-13 tells us the *entire* army of Midian had been beaten and the Midianites were gone. People started asking Gideon to be their king, but he

said, “*The LORD will rule over you.*” In essence, he was saying, “I didn't do this thing. God did it. Obey him!”

Wow! What an amazing story. Gideon and his 300 defeated an army of 135,000, mostly in one night, and the rest just a few days later. However, this is not the real Smashing story in Gideon's life. You see, the barrier between God and His people wasn't necessarily the Midianite army. Was that army a hindrance? A distraction? Yes. The Midianites were starving the people of God. They were persecuting them. Oppressing them. They had to be taken out so that the people of God could enjoy fellowship and peace with God, but that was not the greatest barrier in the way. No, this army of 135,000, that filled a valley so full they looked like “*locusts on the ground*” (Judges 6:5), were not the real barrier keeping God from having sweet fellowship with His people. It was something much worse.

It was the fact that the people of God had raised up a new god to worship, a god of the Midianites and the surrounding lands. Israel had started worshiping Baal, a false god of fertility. They also had erected Asherah poles in honor of another goddess of fertility and worshiped her. In the acts of worshiping these gods, they often gave offerings and sacrifices. This was the real barrier that stood between God and His people.

So, although the story of this huge army sounds good to us and makes us want to lift a war cry to our mighty God, the real story here is that before He did that, God sent Gideon to tear down his father's altar to Baal and his Asherah pole (Judges 6:25-32). If Gideon hadn't obeyed and smashed the altars to these idols, we wouldn't be reading about this other amazing part of his story today.

My point is, sometimes the thing that needs to be smashed first is not the mighty army, but rather the little things we have chosen to worship instead of enjoying fellowship with God.



Agent #4 - Balaam's Donkey - Barrier of Hastiness

Suggested Reading: Numbers 22-24

Admittedly, this is more than likely my kids' favorite of these stories. At first, I was a little skeptical at how we could find an Agent of Smash here, but we did.

Hopefully, by now you know that it's key to read the story in Scripture before diving into reading this. Otherwise, it probably will make very little sense to you. So please, be sure to go and read these chapters in the book of Numbers.

First off, let's be sure we have a clear understanding of the setting. The Israelites were in the process of wandering through the wilderness. They had already come to the edge of the promised land and had fallen short in their attitudes, choosing to not believe God could take them there. They focused more on the circumstances than on the power and might of God. Therefore, they were condemned to "*fall in the desert*" and wander through it for 40 years. Just before this story, they had again complained against God and had grumbled about the food, even asking, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" How quickly they forgot how heavy their sorrows were under Pharaoh and the Egyptians. (May we always remember from where He has brought us so we might glory in where He has us.)

Upon complaining about their position and the food God had supplied, God sent in some venomous snakes as a punishment for their lack of trust and gratefulness. This is where God had Moses lift up a bronze snake on a pole, and all those who looked at the snake were healed. Those who refused to look suffered death.

From there, the Israelites marched through the desert and conquered several lands. It's here we come upon them and meet a king, Balak, who feared them, as they encamped on his lands. He was terrified of them, and what they might do to him and his people, so he sent for Balaam, a sorcerer of sorts. He was evidently well known as a man who spoke to the spirits and was able to either bless or curse a person or an entire nation. (Numbers 22:5-6)

Balaam accepted a fee to seek God on the issue. At night time, God and Balaam had a conversation in which it was very clear that Balaam was *not* supposed to go with these men and curse Israel, for God had chosen to bless them (even though they were constantly turning away from Him!). So, Balaam obeyed and sent home Balak's men.

However, Balak was not so easily deterred and sent a second group of men, some nobles and princes of his land. His intent was to bribe Balaam, and told them to name their price. However, Balaam told the men he couldn't do anything other than what God commanded. Here's the kicker, though: Balaam actually asked God again if he should go. I find that personally interesting, because the first time Balaam asked, God was adamant that he was not to go. The second time, God told him to go ahead, since they had come, but He followed that with a warning to only say what God commanded.

What happens next, in Numbers 22:21-22, is the thing that jumps out at me. God evidently was upset about the whole situation because it says God "*was very angry when he went*" and decided to send an angel to oppose him. What I love about this picture is what God reveals of Himself. God passionately loved the Israelites, and that passion burned hot against anyone who might oppose them. He loved His people, flaws and all. Ever know a set

of brothers who constantly quarrel and bicker with each other, but if an outsider tries to hurt one of them, the other brother always steps in and fights on his brother's behalf, because they are family? I know this is true of my brother and myself, and even cousins of mine. We can be fierce against one another, but it's always a family matter. If anyone outside the family decides to hurt or attack one of us, we always form a common bond and stand together. Now, I'm not trying to humanize God, but rather I'm pointing out that we were created in His image, and were made to reflect Him. In this case, I believe we've been given a natural inclination to burn hot toward anyone who would harm our family and those we've chosen to love. Because of God's passion for His people, He decided to make certain that Balaam remembered what he had been told to *"speak only what I tell you."*

This scene introduces one of God's Agents of Smash—the donkey! (I know, it seems silly, but follow me here.)

Balaam was going headlong into his mission with his marching orders. However, God knows the weakness of any man's heart. Balaam was walking into a situation where he was going to be offered a great deal of money to say a simple curse over Israel, and if he didn't, he possibly would face harm or even death. Because of God's passion for His people, He wanted to ensure Balaam did as he'd been commanded, so He put an angel with a drawn sword in the middle of the road!

Here's another interesting point. Balaam was supposed to be a man who could see the spiritual world. He was known for his intimate connections in the spiritual realm, so an angel standing dead center of the road should have jumped out at him. But, evidently he was just going to do his job and wasn't paying attention to what was in front of him. Therefore, the donkey, who *does* see the angel, decided to take a detour (wouldn't you?).

Sadly, because of her efforts to avoid danger and possible death, she was beaten and scorned by Balaam.

Being ever so patient with Balaam, God backed the angel up between two vineyards with a wall on either side of the road, a place where surely Balaam would see him. But no! So the donkey, in an effort to avoid death and danger, went as far to the side of the path as possible and, in the process, crushed Balaam's foot against the wall. Oh, how this made Balaam mad! He again beat the donkey and cursed it for the pain it caused him, and he forced the donkey onward, oblivious to what was in front of him.

God, being ever so patient, backed the angel up again, but this time, he stood him in the road in a place where there was no way to escape the fact he was there. *Surely* Balaam would notice what he should have already seen, if there was no way around it, right?

No! Again, we see that Balaam was marching forward into a potentially dangerous and tempting situation, so the donkey, seeing no way to get around the angel, simply lay down. Here's where my kids really got a tickle out of the story. As Balaam was doing his best impersonation of an MMA fighter with his opponent on the mat, the donkey looked up at him and spoke! Yes! She spoke to Balaam asking, "*Why are you beating me?*"

Balaam somehow was able to keep his composure at this extremely unusual occurrence and spoke back to the donkey. I wish I could've been there to see the look on Balaam's face during this short conversation in which he tells the donkey if he had a sword in his hand he would've killed it for embarrassing him three times!" And only as God can do, He allowed the donkey to reason with Balaam, asking whether or not in all her years of service to Balaam had she ever acted like that before. (Numbers 22:29-30)

When Balaam said she had not, which means he took a minute to stop and think and consider the situation, only then were his eyes opened to what he should have already seen. When he realized his error in being too busy to be aware of God and what He was doing, he fell on his face before the angel and repented.

Balaam was simply in such a big hurry that his own pace of life and determination were keeping him from being close to God. His desire to do something *for* God was keeping him from being *with* God. So God sent a four-legged Agent of Smash to remind Balaam of what was most important—*God!*

The following scene is one that should speak volumes to all who read this story. Balaam bowed down, and the angel asked him, “Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it.” (Numbers 22: 32-33) Remember, Balaam had threatened to kill his donkey for her behavior; now we see that God would have spared the donkey and slain *him* instead! Agents of Smash aren’t always appreciated, especially when they’re doing what God wants; however, God cares for His Agents. Honestly, the kids and I had a good laugh over this part, but there’s power in that scene and in the words spoken.

Next Balaam is reminded to go, but only speak what the Lord told him to say. Although God had told Balaam to go, He wanted Balaam to be reminded what his purpose was—obedience to Him! God’s love for His people, Israel, was so passionate that He didn’t want Balaam to be carried away with either himself or the temptations he would face. He wanted Balaam to remember he was to seek His face, be ever aware of what God was doing, and

then speak only as God told him to speak. Otherwise, his words, whether good or bad, would be worthless and even potentially harmful to those who were listening.

Balaam went on and seven different times, in Numbers 23-24, Balaam spoke the words God put in his mouth. We see a man focused on his Lord and God and not just the world in front of him. His eyes had been reopened to what was real, God Himself, and because of that, he was able to carry out the mission of blessing the people of God, despite the temptations offered to him by Balak the king, and even in the face of threats on his life, for he feared God above even death itself (Numbers 24:10).

An Agent of Smash has one purpose—to tear down the barriers that separate God and His people. In this case, the barrier facing Balaam was his hastiness to get where he was going and to do his job. Focusing on the task at hand was a barrier, instead of simply being with God. I will say it again: he was so determined to do something *for* God that he was unable to be *with* God. So God sent a donkey to reopen his eyes and remind him of the most important thing of all. The Israelites, God's people, were more than likely unaware of this entire process at the time; however, God saw fit to pass this story on to us, thousands of years later, if for no other reason than to remind us that He's able and willing to use any person, thing, or animal as His instrument, smashing barriers, reminding us to avoid being too busy, too reckless *for* God, and remember to be *with* God!

Praise God for Balaam's donkey, God's Agent of Smash.



Agent #5 - Elijah the Prophet - Barrier of Idols

Suggested Reading: 1 Kings 17-18

What a storybook life this guy had. He's one of two people we're told of in the Bible who didn't taste of death. On his final day, he simply rode a chariot of fire into the heavens and went to be with the Lord. His life was full of mighty prophecies and mighty works on behalf of God and His people. He stood up to one of the most ruthless king and queen duos ever to be known.

Ahab and Jezebel were a murderous and wicked ruling pair who enjoyed killing the prophets of God. They had led the Israelites into the gross pagan worship of Baal and Asherah, false gods, and several other wicked idols. People were giving themselves to wicked rituals which included the murdering of babies as sacrifices to these gods. It was an awful time to be living in the promised land, and especially for Elijah, as these two evil rulers were constantly plotting to have him killed.

As we come upon this time in Elijah's life, he'd just finished prophesying that there would be no more rain in Israel until he said so. He did this in obedience to God, actually facing Ahab to deliver this word from God. Afterward, he fled in fear for his life, as Ahab again sought to have him killed. As he had prophesied, the land of Israel saw no rain, not even a sprinkle or dew, for three entire years. Can you imagine how parched the ground would've been? How cracked the soil would have become? The grass surely had withered up, and livestock were having difficulty finding anything to eat. People were feeling the effects, not having enough water and food themselves, as the drought meant there were no crops. Elijah had become the most hated man in all the land, for he held the key to end all this.

In the meantime, while the drought was happening, God had kept Elijah alive, sending ravens with food, giving him a small brook, and supplying oil and flour from a widow and her son. Once the brook dried up, God sent Elijah to the widow's home, where He made sure her nearly-empty jar of oil and flour never ran dry. He fed the family and Elijah, sustaining them during this time. (1 Kings 17:14)

Meanwhile, as you can imagine, Ahab, Jezebel, and all the leaders and people of the land were asking Baal and their other idols to supply them. They had turned their backs on God completely, according to the Scriptures, so their only hope was these false gods. After three years of no answers, Elijah was sent back onto the scene to smash the barrier between God and His people—idolatry.

When God set this scene up, man, did He intend to show off!

Elijah showed up in town again and told Ahab that it was time to talk. Ahab, of course, still wanted him dead. In fact, Ahab had sent people all over the world, so to speak, looking for Elijah so he could kill him. When they were finally face-to-face, Ahab referred to him as the “*troubler of Israel*,” (1 Kings 18:17) but this intense moment was only the setup for what was to come.

Elijah gave Ahab a chore to do. He told him to bring out the 450 Baal prophets and 400 prophets of Asherah, along with the people of Israel, to Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:19). Once they gathered, Elijah asked them a very important question:

“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” (1 Kings 18:21)

Interestingly enough, the people stayed silent, so Elijah threw out the challenge. It was simple and straightforward. Bring out two bulls and build two altars. The 450 Baal prophets versus Elijah! Simple rules: Each side was to prepare a sacrifice and call on their god. No fire allowed to either side. The god who answered by fire, consuming the sacrifice, would be known as the Only God in Israel. Upon hearing this challenge, the people of Israel agreed to the contest. Actually, it sounds like something of a spectacle to watch, maybe even some entertainment.

When it was time to call for the fire, Elijah offered the other team the opportunity to go first. Can you imagine the thoughts going through Elijah's head while he listened to the prophets all call on Baal? I wonder if he ever flinched in his spirit, considering the possibility that maybe Baal would send fire. However, after hours of listening to the chants, the shouts, and watching the dancing, Elijah started to taunt them a little.

Have you ever sat at a game of any kind and heard the opposing team taunt the home team? Maybe heard the crowd jeer a little and try to start up a little something? I am not advocating this behavior; however, in this case, that's exactly what we see Elijah do. He started to poke fun at the prophets of Baal, asking if maybe their god was in deep thought, too busy, or maybe even on vacation. To kind of put an exclamation point to it, he even insinuates that Baal is possibly asleep and needs to be awakened!

You know those taunts and jeers you've heard at games? Do you ever see the team that the taunts are aimed at get so riled up that they respond, and because they do, things only get worse for them? Again, Elijah got what he was after, as all the prophets started shouting louder and even resorting to slashing themselves, offering their own blood if only Baal would answer. However,

regardless of all their attempts, we're told that by evening, no one had answered, no one had responded, and no one paid attention (1 Kings 18:29).

Finally, it was Elijah's turn, and he stepped up the game a little by not only preparing the sacrifice, but, after three years of drought, he had precious water poured over his altar until a trench around it was full. He had his altar and sacrifice dumped with water three times, until it was completely drenched. Then, he simply said:

“LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” (1 Kings 18:36-37)

God answered this prayer by sending the fire, but it wasn't just to consume the sacrifice. We're told that it consumed *everything*. It took the bull, the wood, the rocks used for the altar, the dirt, and all the water that had been poured on it. Baal's guys had been at it all day, and there was nothing. Elijah prayed one simple and precise prayer, and look what God did.

Of course, this immediately inspired the people of Israel to cry out, *“The LORD he is God! The LORD, he is GOD!”* Elijah ordered the people to seize the prophets of Baal, and had them all killed that day. They purged the land of the false prophets and sent Ahab packing. Because Elijah was willing to be bold and trust that God would prove Himself to His people, God showed up in a mighty way to remove the barrier between Him and His people.

When the show was over and all the prophets of Baal had been slain, Elijah called upon God, who was restored to His people, to return rain to the land, and God again proved Himself faithful!

Note: If you want to take a little extra time, I'd highly recommend reading the next chapter, just to point out the fact that Elijah was a man just like we are. We find him hiding again, because despite the show of power, Ahab and Jezebel doubled their efforts to kill Elijah, and he simply ran in fear. He ended up so depressed that he asked God to take him in death because he was the only one left to serve God. He literally gave up, but God was not finished with this Agent of Smash yet. I highly recommend the rest of the story.

DAVID



Agent #6 - David - Barrier of Unbelief

Suggested Reading: 1 Samuel 17

The story of David vs. Goliath is a well-known tale of the little guy beating the big guy. In fact, it's used today in sports analogies when a little known team defeats a powerhouse school. It's the ultimate feel-good story that we love to tell, and in this study for my kids it was no different. Hopefully you've read the account of this story in 1 Samuel 17.

It never ceases to amaze me how an old story can still be so rich with His blessings. I can honestly say I've heard the story of David and Goliath told so many times in my own life that at times I started to assume I knew it all by heart. Choosing it as part of the Agents of Smash collection seemed rather simple. However, I'm personally thankful that God brought my eyes back to it from a different perspective, to further enrich my understanding.

You see, this story is so easily lost in the fact that the little guy overcomes and defeats the seemingly impossible. That's why when an underdog team in sports wins, the announcer always seems to yell out, "A real life David beats Goliath story!" It resonates with us because, at some point in time, we've all felt like the underdog who had no chance to win.

But this story is much deeper than just a victorious underdog. Remember, an Agent of Smash is always sent to break down a barrier between God and His people. In this case, it seems clear that a 9-foot-tall giant might be the barrier keeping people from God, and he did play his role. However, the barrier was much greater than just a giant.

To get a better picture, we really must back up just a bit and catch up on the story of David prior to this big battle. David first came up in the previous chapter, 1 Samuel 16, when God was looking for a replacement king for Saul. God was displeased with how Saul was trying to run Israel with his own wisdom and knowledge, and He had, therefore, sent the prophet Samuel to find the next king of Israel.

Of course, Samuel showed up looking for a tall, rugged, handsome, and strong leader. When he arrived to meet Jesse, David's father, he saw Eliab, David's oldest brother, and assumed in his heart that he was looking at the next chosen king. God told Samuel not to look on the outside, because God was looking for the right heart. Seven more of David's brothers passed before Samuel, but God declined each one of them. Finally, Samuel asked if there was yet another son, and Jesse sent for his youngest son, who was doing the lowest labor of the day—tending sheep. When David arrived, God told Samuel that this was His chosen man, so Samuel anointed him with oil in the presence of his older brothers and dad, telling them that David would be the next king of Israel.

Let's just step into David's shoes for a minute. One minute, you're out watching your dad's sheep, and the next, the prophet of the day is pouring oil on your head and telling your family that God has decided you'll be the next king of Israel. Can you imagine the anger and frustration his older brothers felt for being passed over by God? I think it would have been similar to the anger felt by the brothers of Joseph when their dad treated him with such favor, even though they were older. What should have been a happy time in the family became a seed of anger which shows its head a little later.

One quick look at this little scenario also reveals how this could be a death sentence for David. Samuel himself was even afraid to go anoint David (1 Samuel 16:2) for fear that Saul would have him killed. Anointing a new king was treason and would be considered a threat. Therefore, all of this was done under the guise of meeting to make an offering. It all had to be kept hush hush.

God, however, had something different in mind. Instead of keeping David away from Saul, he actually placed David in Saul's direct service. King Saul began to live in torment (1 Samuel 16:14). An evil or depressing spirit would come over Saul. He lived in constant mental frustration, so he asked if there were any skilled musicians he could call on to play soothing music in his presence. Guess who was a great harp player? That's right. David was a well-known harp player, so they brought the anointed future king to play for Saul. We're told that Saul liked him so much that he told David's father Jesse that he was going to keep David as a permanent servant to play any time Saul needed him. So David became an armor bearer for the king of Israel, the very man he had been chosen to replace as king.

The reason it's important to know the backstory is because it leads us to the moment of truth when Goliath steps onto the scene. David had become a trusted servant of the king; however, when Saul took the army of Israel, including the three oldest brothers of David, and went to war with the Philistines, we find David back in the fields with the sheep. David went home to tend to his father's flock, away from the action.

While David was watching over the sheep, Goliath was stepping out every day, taunting the men of Israel with his size and strength. He had the whole army of Israel in a place of complete fear. He came out for 40 straight days and made a simple offer: If

Israel could send out a man to fight and defeat Goliath, then the war would be over, and all the Philistines would become the servants of Israel. However, if Goliath won, Israel would have to serve the Philistines. Simple enough, I'd say. Instead of many people dying during a war, this was a way to settle it all one-on-one.

In Samuel 17:11, we find that this idea actually terrified Saul and all the other men of Israel, and they lost all hope. In other words, they were facing a fight that they simply could not win. Fear had settled over the people of God—they were looking only at the giant in front of them. They couldn't see past his massive size, strength, and reputation. Their eyes were so narrowed in on Goliath, they couldn't even remember what their God had done for them in the past. Suddenly, they were unable to remember the Red Sea, or Jericho, or the stories of Samson. Goliath, the enemy, had them literally shaking in their boots.

Then, along came this little shepherd boy whose father had sent him to check on his older brothers. David arrived just in time to hear Goliath come out and make his challenge to Israel. We see that David was anxious to get to the battle lines and see his brothers. As he spoke with them, out came the Giant, and we're told that the men of Israel ran in fear (1 Samuel 17:24).

David was standing there listening to all of those rugged warriors talking about what the king had offered to any man who beat Goliath. What I find interesting is that Saul himself was very tall and known to be a warrior. In fact, he was said to be a full head taller than all other Israelites (1 Samuel 9:2), yet he was asking for volunteers to go fight on his behalf. The prize he offered was quite substantial: Great wealth, the king's very own daughter as a wife (instantly becoming royalty), and the victor's family freed from

paying any taxes. David overheard that this *huge* reward was being offered, and began to inquire about it.

David's tone was one of disbelief. "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel?" (1 Samuel 17:26) What I think shocked David the most was that Goliath had been at this for 40 days and nights, but no one had yet taken up the king on his offer. Instead of having the courage to take him on, they all grew even more afraid. David was shocked, not just because no one had stepped up for the prize offered, but that they would even allow any man to "*defy the armies of the living God.*" (1 Samuel 17:26)

David's brothers overheard him talking and the anger they felt when he was first chosen as king showed back up, more or less saying to him "Who are you boy? Asking such things to grown men! You are nothing more than a watcher of a few sheep and you are only here because you wanted to watch a show! This is not entertainment, why don't you go home!" These brothers were extremely angry at David, but from their tone, you can tell their frustration went deeper than just finding him there. The big question they asked was simply this, "Who are you?" Which they answered themselves with, "You're a nobody!"

However, David was not deterred by his brothers' thoughts about him. He kept asking around, seemingly seeking for anyone who would step up. He asked around so much that word got back to Saul, so David was brought before the king. As soon as David stepped into the king's tent he basically said, "Don't worry your majesty, I'll go take care of this Philistine for you. Let me fight him!" (1 Samuel 17:32). You have to give David points for gumption. It was certain he had seen Goliath, yet he was undeterred from his willingness to fight. David was just simply mad that anyone would

dare defy God like that man had. However, for the second time, another person told David he couldn't do something.

Saul looked at David and simply said he wasn't going to be able to do this. (1 Samuel 17:33). Saul pointed out David's size, lack of experience, and the fact that Goliath had been fighting since he was just a youth. Basically, Saul was telling David, "Who are you? You can't do this. You're too weak!"

David must have had a fire of passion in his blood, because not even what Saul said curbed his desire to go fight. In fact, his passion to go seemed to grow as he told the king about a lion and a bear attacking his sheep and how he had attacked them and struck them down. He looked at Saul and said, "The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine." (1 Samuel 17:37) I have to point out that David did not just say "this man." He actually was so confident that he hurled an insult at Goliath, calling him "uncircumcised!"

Saul saw a man who was willing but, in his opinion, wasn't able, so he decided to put David in his armor, which David had been known to carry around for the king. However, if Saul was a head taller than all of Israel, and David was just a boy, you can imagine how well that went. Samuel tells us that the armor was too large and slowed David down. David finally had to tell Saul that the armor wouldn't work, after which he shed it and headed out to battle with nothing but a shepherd's staff and a sling. This would be similar to carrying a knife into a gunfight—it wasn't really what we'd call a smart move, but David went out with confidence.

When Goliath saw this small, ruddy boy heading his way, I can imagine how funny he thought it was. In fact, I think at first he thought it was a joke. When he saw David, he literally asked, "Who

are you?" I mean, he had been out there for 40 days asking for Israel's mightiest warrior, and now some little boy with a staff was coming his way. Whenever a giant throws down a challenge that's answered by a seeming nobody, the giant can feel somewhat disrespected.

Goliath's words make it clear that's exactly how he felt. "Am I a dog that you have come out to fight me?" he said. I'm sure he was wondering where the mighty warriors were. One could ask why David's brothers didn't go out to fight him. Samuel describes them as tall and strong. Why not them? Goliath was so furious he basically told David, "I'm going to feed you to the birds and dogs, boy!" I cannot imagine what it must have felt like for David to be standing there opposite this man. It would have been overwhelming in the eyes of any man, but, somehow, David moved forward.

At this point, I hope you've been following along with what David was up against, what the actual barrier was between God and His people. Sure, it seemed like the barrier was a 9-foot-tall man who was an amazing warrior itching to kill someone. It appeared the barrier was this man whose sword and spear would strike terror in the heart of anyone simply by looking at them. But appearances can be very deceiving.

Three times along the path to Goliath, David had been told he was a nobody. He'd been told three times, "You can't do this!" The barrier that was keeping Israel from being with God was their unbelief. They didn't believe in God and, therefore, had no faith that He would actually help them win the battle. So God did what He always does: He sent one of His Agents of Smash to crush the barrier and win the day.

You see, David had no issue believing God could take down this man who stood in front of him. David wasn't looking at his inabilities, but rather he focused on what God could do. What amazed David the most was the fact that no one else in all of Israel's army seemed to believe as he did. Hadn't God rescued them at the Red Sea? Hadn't God sent men before, like Samson and Gideon? Were they not all versed in how the walls of Jericho fell? So, why is it that they saw this giant as a bigger issue than any of those things? It's because they no longer believed God was alive and active among them.

They had begged for a king to lead them, and the very king they asked for was hiding in his tent, offering his daughter as prize money if someone would go fight for him. The people had decided to look at their own strengths and had forgotten to remember who their God was.

However, God already had this day planned out. He had told the nation of Israel how bad it would be if they chose a king to rule them, instead of allowing Him to choose. He warned them that they would live in fear of others and even the king they chose. (1 Samuel 8). God warned them that an earthly king would tax them heavily, make them slaves, and then send them out in front of him in any battle. Before that time, whenever the Israelites fought a war, God Himself had gone in front of them, leading the charge. Now, they had a king cowering in a tent.

God had reserved a special Agent of Smash for this day. A shepherd boy, small and despised in the eyes of men, yet valiant in faith. This young man's faith in God had grown as he defeated a lion and a bear using only his hands. He was also wise enough to realize that if it weren't for the God about whom his father had told him many stories from Israel's history, he would have been killed by those animals. Though just a boy, this Agent of Smash had built

strong faith in his God. So when he faced the Giant, it was nothing to him, because his eyes weren't on the fight ahead, but on the God whom he served. His belief wasn't in his own might, or strength, or abilities, but in the Might, Strength, and Ability of his God.

Goliath threatened to feed David's body to the birds, but David's belief in God led him to say this:

“You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand.” (1 Samuel 17:45-47, underline added.)

David had some real guts, I'd say. Goliath said he was going to feed David to the birds, but David responded by saying he was going to feed Goliath and the entire Philistine army to the birds and beasts of the field. David was what one might say, *all in!* Although the people of Israel no longer believed in God, although the king of Israel hid in a tent, David, whose faith had been built through smaller battles, was ready for the fight at hand. He fully expected God to defeat this giant, but not only that, he expected to see God beat the entire army of this invading nation.

It barely needs rehearsing what happened next, as we all know that Goliath came toward David, certainly in rage, clearly confident that this wouldn't be hard. David *ran* at Goliath, took out

one stone for his sling, and down fell the mighty giant. Goliath was dead on the ground—but just to fulfill his promise, David took Goliath's own sword and cut off his head and held it high.

When the army of the Philistines saw this, they tucked tail and ran, while on the other side of the battlefield the Israelites, overwhelmed with confidence, attacked, leaving the Philistine army dead on the field. One moment all seemed lost, the next moment God's Agent of Smash destroyed the unbelief of the people. As the giant in their way fell, so did their lack of faith.

For David, this was just the start of a journey as God's Agent of Smash. His life was full of stories about overcoming a lack of faith in God, in order to see God win the battle. The day that he defeated Goliath surely remained close to his heart, as he walked through other seemingly impossible situations that would require "*the LORD to deliver*"! On that day, no one believed in David. Everyone said, "You cannot do this, you're a nobody!" But David knew God, and he also knew that God can use anyone to do anything, as long as that person is willing.

MOSES



Agent #7 - Moses - Barrier of Impatience

Suggested Reading: Exodus 32

By now I'm sure you already know that if you haven't taken a moment to read the Scripture for this story, well, you're wasting your time. Go enjoy this story, and I'll see you in the next paragraph.

When I thought of using Moses for this study with my kids, I was almost certain we'd talk about the 10 plagues and being led out of Egypt (Exodus 7-11). When that didn't seem like what God wanted to use, I was then positive it would be the account of the Red Sea crushing Pharaoh's army (Exodus 13-14). However, that wasn't what God wanted me to look at either. Where He took me was to Exodus 32, the story of the Golden Calf.

Before we get into this smashing event, it again needs to be looked at as a whole story. Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for nearly 400 years, first invited in as guests of Pharaoh (Genesis 45:15-18), but after years of growing as a nation the Egyptians had forced them into slavery. Every day they did back-breaking labor and Pharaoh had even commanded that any newborn boys were to be killed in order to stop the growth of their people. All of this oppression led them to cry out to the the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and He heard their cry. So He raised up one from their own nation to be brought up in the house of Pharaoh, who then fled to the desert, only to be called back by a burning bush.

Moses arrived back in Israel and told the people that God was going to deliver them, but before it got better, things got worse. Pharaoh increased their workload while demanding no

decrease in the number of bricks they made. He constantly had his foremen beating the workers if they were moving too slowly. Life was terrible.

Then God showed up, and as that friend of mine likes to say, not only did He show up, *He showed off*. In Exodus 3:18-20, God as much as told Moses that He planned on stretching out His hand against Pharaoh, who would be stubborn about letting them go. God wanted to redeem this people in such a way that word would travel throughout the world about the mighty God of Israel. Seeing how other nations feared Israel as they marched through the wilderness proves that God's plan worked.

Not only did He perform mighty wonders in Egypt on behalf of Israel, He also delivered them from certain death when they were trapped between the Red Sea and the army of Pharaoh. On that day the people were mad at Moses for bringing them out of Egypt, because they knew they faced certain death. They cried out, "*Were there no burial spots in Egypt for us that you brought us out to the desert to die?*" (Exodus 14:11). However, the people were unaware that God had decided to set up another scene meant to strike fear in the rest of the world, so that they wouldn't dare attack His people. In Exodus 14:1-4, God told Moses to wander about, saying that He would harden Pharaoh's heart, sending him out to prove again that "I am the Lord." (Exodus 14:4) Did God ever pull through, as Moses told the people to "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. **14** The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." (Exodus 14:13-14).

As Pharaoh closed in on the people, God opened the Red Sea and all of Israel walked through on dry ground. When Pharaoh tried to follow, suddenly the ground became muddy again, and his

entire army was caught in the muck and the mire as the water walls came crashing back on top of them. What an amazing God!

You would think after having lived through those two astounding events, that the people of Israel would have full trust and confidence in God's ability to take care of them, right? However, they were quite a hard headed bunch, and next we see them complaining about a lack of food and water. In fact, they complained several times about these issues, and yet God looked past the complaining and provided their needs. Sweet bread (manna) from heaven came down with the dew. Quail became abundant in their midst. Water poured from rocks struck with a staff, and even bitter water was turned to sweet by adding a piece of wood. All this was done despite the Israelites' tendency to grumble and complain. Seems like no matter how much God provided for them, they were never simply thankful

All this led to a place called Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19. The pillar of fire at night and the thick cloud by day led the people to this mountain. At the mountain, God told Moses to gather the people around, but they had to keep behind a barrier around the mountain so that His holiness would not consume them. God told them He would treat them as His treasured people if they would keep His laws.

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a

kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:3-6 NIV)

What a fantastic deal. God was saying that although all the world was His, He was going to treasure them and call them His holy people. As you can imagine, Israel jumped at that offer by agreeing to obey God and keep His covenants (Exodus 19:8). This is where God gave them what we call the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), finishing out the details of the law in Exodus 21-23. So Israel was about to enter an amazing life with God, the one who had so mightily brought them out of Egypt and provided all their physical needs for food and water, calling them “My treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5).

So, what happened in chapter 32? I mean, after chapter 23, Moses went up to speak with God and God literally gave him the details about how to build a dwelling house (the Tabernacle Tent) so that God himself could live amongst the people. He was gone all of 40 days—*40 days*. Meanwhile, the people were down at the foot of the mountain wondering if he was ever going to come back. So, after all they had seen God do:

1. The Plagues on Egypt.
2. The Red Sea.
3. The bitter water turned sweet.
4. Manna bread from heaven.
5. Water gush from a rock.
6. God speaking to them from the cloud at Mt Sinai.

After all that, they decided to approach Aaron and ask him for some sort of image they could call god and worship for bringing them out of Egypt.

Seriously, 40 days is all it took for them to become impatient and ask for some piece of metal to call lord. Aaron, the one who held the staff that became a snake and watched the

entire Nile river turn to blood, who had watched firsthand all the mighty and wonderful works of God, cowered in fear before the people and gave them what they wanted. He took gold pieces and fashioned an idol in the shape of a bull calf. Then we're told that the people worshiped the calf, praising it as the god who delivered them from Israel (Exodus 32:1-6).

Of course God saw all this and initially decided to kill the people and form a new nation through Moses. However, Moses begged God not to do that, thinking that Egypt and other nations would say that God had only delivered them so He could kill them. Therefore, God turned from His anger and instead sent an Agent of Smash to tear down what had come between Him and His people.

Moses came down the mountain after pleading on behalf of the people, and, well, the inner Hulk came out. What he saw enraged him so much that he took the stone tablets that God Himself had written and smashed them on the foot of the mountain. He cried out, "What have you done?" He was so mad that he took the idol, ground it into a fine powder, and threw it in the water supply. He then made the people drink the water so they could taste the bitterness of their sin.

Then, in his rage, he turned to Aaron and was like, "What the heck did you do? Why did you lead these people into sin?" To which Aaron replied with a lame attempt to cover his tracks, saying that all he did was throw gold into a fire and *poof*, out popped an image of a calf. "It was like magic Moses!" is what Aaron was saying. (Read Exodus 32:4 again just to remember what actually happened.)

So Moses stood at the entrance to their camp and called the men of God together. On that day, Moses oversaw the death

of about 3,000 people who had tainted themselves by worshipping the idol. They had made fools of themselves and of God. So Moses, after smashing the stone tablets and the idol, also smashed the foolishness of the people. It seems maybe a little harsh, but considering that God was prepared to erase the entire people from the planet, their punishment was rather light.

Here's the takeaway from this Agent of Smash. Although the people had seen God do mighty works, they were constantly complaining about not having a better life. They were looking at what they didn't have, instead of being grateful for the freedom God had given them. This complaining spirit led to their extreme impatience while they awaited Moses at the foot of the mountain. Just a few short days after committing to obey God and to keep His covenants and be His treasured people, they were wondering if maybe they were just being left alone in the desert. So they asked for a God they could touch, feel, see, and not be afraid of—all things their God was not. Once given this visual god, they immediately started breaking all the other rules God had given them in chapter 20.

What they didn't know was that God had been working with Moses on how He was going to be able to come live among them for the first time since He had last left the Garden of Eden. Ever since God had to leave His daily walks with Adam and Eve because of their sin, He had been planning on how He might could once again live with the people He created and loved. Throughout Exodus 24-29, God had given Moses detailed instructions on how to build a dwelling tent for Himself in the middle of the people he had rescued from Egypt. Take a look at this:

“So I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests. Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their

God. They will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.” (Exodus 29:44-46, underlining added.)

God had worked out a way that He could once again live among His people, yet the people could not even wait 40 days to hear His wonderful plan. So Moses smashed their idol, their rebellion, their impatience, and prayed that God would forgive them. (Exodus 32:31-32) Without this pleading and acts of smashing by Moses, the people might never have realized how awesome it was to have God live among them!

SATAN



Agent #8 - Satan - Barrier of Religion

Suggested Reading: Job 1, 2 , and 42:5

I know, it's hard to believe that God's enemy is actually on the list of God's Agents of Smash. However, it was true for Job and is often still true today. We have to remember the purpose of an Agent of Smash and their purpose. An Agent of Smash is one who is sent to break down the barrier between God and His people.

Now, I knew from the first day I started this study with my children that I was going to tell them this story. It's one that has meant a lot to me personally, and I remember when God revealed to me the truth about Satan doing His smashing for Him. If you know anything about superhero stories, you know there are times when the good guy has to enlist the help of one of the villains to accomplish what needs to be done. The hero and the villain never get over their dislike for one another, but when it's necessary, the villain will join the hero and do what has to be done. That's what we see here in the story of Job, as Satan acts as God's Agent of Smash.

What I love about this story is that it's difficult to know exactly what needs smashing. If you have a basic knowledge of Job's story, then you know he's the one who gets smashed by Satan. However, Job was not the barrier between himself and God. There was something much greater keeping God from His servant, Job. So God sent out one of His most dangerous agents to break down this huge barrier, so that God could come near to Job.

If you've read the first two chapters, you probably get the gist of what's happening. We hear about this amazing man named

Job who was rich and very religious. He would often make sacrifices just in case his children had sinned. Job was what we today would call the most devout and loyal Christian. Even God referred to him as “*blameless*”. (Job 1:8).

We find God sitting on His throne, with His angels coming in to report to Him about what's going on down on earth. Along with all the angels, Satan came in, and God questioned him about where he'd been and what he'd been up to.

Satan answered the LORD, “From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.” (Job 1:7)

It's important to stop and think a little more about what Satan was saying. When he referred to “*roaming throughout the earth*,” there was a purpose for his roaming. We actually find that purpose over in 1 Peter 5:8 where we're told that Satan “*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*.” Actually, what Satan was saying to God was something like, “Where have I been? Well, I've been out looking for someone to mess around with and tear up their life!”

What does God say next?

Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”

Allow me just a second to bring this all together for you. God asked Satan where he'd been. Satan responded by saying that he'd been roaming around looking for someone to tear up, and God said, “Have you thought about going after Job?”

Why in the world would God offer a “*blameless*” man to Satan to mess with? In fact, even Satan was apparently a little surprised by the offer, because his response was one of shock. Satan told God that he would love to mess with Job but that he couldn’t because God had made him untouchable, with a protective wall built around him (Job 1:9-11), so God in an instant lifted His protective hand and allowed Satan to have liberty with everything Job had, except his body.

Boy, did Satan ever go to work. Job was sitting around one day and enjoying life when suddenly one of his servants came and told him he had lost all of his cattle and donkeys. Before he could even finish, another servant arrived to tell Job that all his sheep and shepherds were burnt by a fire from heaven. On top of that, another servant arrived, breathing heavily from the run, and told Job that all his camels had been taken, and all Job had left were these three servants and his family. That is, until another servant arrived from the house where Job’s kids were having a feast. This servant dropped the heaviest words on Job, telling him that all his children had died when a strong wind blew down the house.

Can you even imagine the weight of hearing all of this in the matter of minutes? Job had gone from the wealthiest man on earth to literally losing everything in the matter of five minutes or less. His gut must have wrenched from all this news, yet, somehow, he was able to cry out these famous words:

***“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.
The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised.” (Job 1:21)***

Despite all the loss, Job didn’t sin or blame God for anything. He simply kept being the best ‘Christian’ he knew how to

be. Now, at the conclusion we know he mourned, because he tore his robe and shaved his head. These were signs of extreme grief and sorrow, yet Job did his best to handle the situation like a 'good Christian' would. He hurt deeply, but he refused to ask God why He had allowed this to happen to him. God was trying to tear down a barrier Job had between the two of them; unfortunately for Job, he'd missed the point of what happened, so now we begin round two.

The same scene played out again in heaven, as God had his angels come in and report. Satan came in again, along with the angels, and God asked him the same question, "What have you been up to?" Satan gave God the same response, saying that he was on the lookout for someone else to mess with. Amazingly, right after everything Job had been through, and seeming to have passed the test, God offered Job up again to Satan, this time using a little of what one might call trickery.

Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited (or tried to trick) me against him to ruin him without any reason." (Job 2:3)

You see, God needed Satan to push Job just a little harder. Losing all of his material possessions and children did not get Job to sit down and ask the tough questions, so God got his meanest Agent back in gear and offered Satan a second chance at Job. God even pretended that Satan had tricked Him before, but if you simply read the wording, you can easily see that God was setting this all up. God knows how quickly Satan will jump at the chance to hurt someone, so he gave him permission to touch Job's body this time—only he couldn't kill Job. Think about that. God had just

given Satan permission to make Job hurt so much that he would rather die than live, but Satan couldn't actually kill him.

I don't even want to pretend that the next part is easy to read. Satan hit Job so hard that literally no man should have to endure that much pain and sorrow. We know it was extremely severe because Job at one point even said he'd just rather go ahead and die! (Job 6:8-9). His pain level would have been almost unbearable, yet he continued to live. His friends showed up and could hardly recognize him (Job 2:12). They sat in ashes and dust for seven days without saying a word because Job's pain was so severe.

From the world's point of view, this must have been the absolute worst two days in one man's history. It was almost like Job was being punished for doing wrong. However, we must remember that God Himself called Job "*blameless*," or in some translations, "*righteous*." Job could only sit and wonder what went wrong. Why had God allowed all of this misery to come upon him?

When words were finally used again, in Chapter 3, Job for the first time began to question God. He simply wanted to know why such misery had come upon him and why he couldn't just die. He tells us in Chapter 3, verse 25, that what he had "*dreaded most*" happened to him. In other words, Satan knew exactly how to hurt Job the most, and he was allowed to do it. Job simply couldn't understand why God would let this happen. He even referred to the "*hedge of protection*" God had put up, as the very thing that now was hemming him in a corner (verse 23). After seven days of thinking, Job decided that God must have been against him, but why?

I love how the rest of the story unfolds. As you read Chapters 4-37, you see an ongoing argument, starting in Job 4:7. Job's first friend, Eliphaz, came gently to Job and told him that he

must have sinned in some way. He reminded Job of all the times Job had helped others through hard times by pointing out their need for forgiveness. Eliphaz, after hearing Job cry out about being wrongly mistreated in Chapter 3, essentially told Job that he needed to confess whatever sin it was he was trying to hide and then offer a sacrifice to cover it before God's eyes.

Job responded by saying that he had searched his heart and mind, looking for his sin, but had found nothing. He'd reviewed things in his own mind to see if there was anything he'd overlooked that would have brought on such harsh punishment. He told these men how terrible they were at being his friends, and then he turned to God.

Job's argument for the rest of the book is laid out in these words, spoken to God:

***“What is mankind that you make so much of them,
that you give them so much attention,
that you examine them every morning
and test them every moment?
Will you never look away from me,
or let me alone even for an instant?
If I have sinned, what have I done to you,
you who see everything we do?
Why have you made me your target?
Have I become a burden to you?
Why do you not pardon my offenses
and forgive my sins?
For I will soon lie down in the dust;
you will search for me, but I will be no more.” (Job
7:17-21)***

Job made an assumption. He assumed that the God he knew about would never have allowed such tragedy to happen to a “*blameless*” man! The God he knew about would have protected him because he had done everything in his power to keep God happy. Job, frankly, was mad at God for not being who he thought God was. Job’s whole understanding of God was instantly destroyed when his life fell apart.

Job’s friends also made an assumption. They assumed Job must have done something to deserve the punishment. They had all grown up together, learning about the same God, so they too assumed God would not punish an innocent man. They were consistent in their advice to Job, telling him to find out what he’d done wrong and repent.

What’s seen as a great argument between these men boils down to this: They all understood God the same way, but Job’s experience was now putting that understanding to the test. The truth is, Job didn’t want to believe he was wrong about God, but his life was now screaming that something wasn’t right. Job’s friends didn’t want to believe God had punished a man who had done no wrong, because that would destroy their entire belief system and force them to face a God they didn’t know or understand. That was simply too frightening, so they had to find something as a cause for Job’s apparent punishment.

The absolute beauty of this story comes full circle as we see that, after Job and his friends were finished arguing, God came and spoke to Job. Chapters 38-41 are an eloquent explanation to Job of what needed to be smashed! Job knew a lot about God, but he’d missed the entire point of all of the knowledge he’d gained. His entire life was wrapped up in making sure he had all the facts about God and keeping this God happy. What God wanted was far more than just someone knowing about Him. He

wanted Job to *know* Him. He wanted Job to have intimate fellowship with Him, not just someone who could be “*blameless*” in his actions. God longed for a relationship, and all Job had was religious knowledge.

Therefore, God sent His enemy, Satan, as an Agent of Smash to tear down Job’s supposed knowledge of God. He allowed Satan to do things that contradicted what Job knew about God in order to introduce Job to a relationship with Him.

Of all of the verses in the Bible, I have to say Job 42:5 is one of my favorites:

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. (Job 42:5)

What Job said as he turned from his understanding of God was this: “Before today, I knew about you. I had lived my life based on rumors and man’s understanding of you. But now, God, after having lived through this and heard Your voice, I now can say, ‘I know You!’”

Such an amazing story of God’s love and compassion for one man. God looked down and saw that Job was living the perfect ‘Christian’ life, but he was missing the point of it all. In his efforts to obey the law and keep God happy, Job missed out on the very source of God’s joy—a relationship with Him. So, God sent His agent of Smash, Satan, to tear down all of Job’s knowledge, which was the barrier between God and Job, so that Job could finally *know* God! “Hallelujah,” Job shouted, as he lived the rest of his life in a most beautiful relationship with his Creator! (Job 42:10-17)

As a side note, Satan can be heard throughout the ages complaining, “Ah, God did it to me again! He tricked me into being His Agent of Smash to make someone know Him better. I was certain I was going to win this time, but God always seems to outsmart me.”

On the other side, God can be heard saying, “Okay, who else needs to have their knowledge about Me broken down, using My most dangerous and unsuspected Agent of Smash, so they can really *know* Me?”

I can honestly say I didn't like my personal journey through this story, but like Job, I rejoice because once I only knew about God—I'd heard of him—but now my eyes have seen Him!

JABSTOPS



Agent #9 - Jesus - Barrier of Greed

Suggested Reading: Matthew 12:21-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48, & John 2:13-17

I love talking about the story of Jesus losing it in the temple. When we started the series on Agents of Smash, I was secretly hoping God would lead us in the direction of this story. I was so thrilled when it was evident that this story was part of the bigger picture.

If you've read the passages above, then you know what happened. We find Jesus literally strolling into the temple courtyard one day when, suddenly, the green monster erupted. Out of nowhere, Jesus was seen with a whip and was driving out cattle, sheep, people, and flipping over tables!

Picture that for just a moment with me. Imagine yourself standing in the courtyard of the temple, when suddenly, this man you have watched heal people, feed the masses, and love the ones others considered unlovable, now starts beating people up. He's running around with a whip like a madman, chasing cows and sheep out of the place. He then turns his attention to the humans and drives them out, flipping over tables full of money in the process. Not only that, but once he's driven them out, he literally stands guard, refusing to let them back in.

Tell me, what would you call this man? My children gave the following answers:

1. A madman.

2. A lunatic.
3. A crazy man.
4. A man out of his mind.
5. A nut job!

Now, if we came up with those names from hearing the story, what do you think the people experiencing it felt like? How could a man who had shown such mercy and kindness do something apparently so violent? I grew up hearing of His righteous anger, but this seems to be something beyond that. This was a man who was thoroughly incensed! And for good reason.

Jesus finished His tirade and looked around at the ones in charge, all the priests, and He said, *“My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”* (Matthew 21:13, underline added.)

You see, it wasn't simply that Jesus was upset about the activities being carried on, it was the damage that had been done that made Him so upset. Remember, an Agent of Smash is always sent to remove a barrier between God and His people. Jesus saw a barrier and it infuriated Him. A house of prayer is a place where one is suppose to be able to come commune (talk with) God. However, these men and their wicked actions had made that impossible.

Talking with God is something best done in a *quiet* place. Can you imagine the noise level from all the animals in the courtyard? If you can't, go to a local cattle sale in your area. The noise is deafening at times. There's rarely a quiet moment there. And the smell. I promise you, animals didn't just suddenly hold it in because they were in the house of God. So, being able to concentrate and be still with God would have been nigh impossible, simply due to the number of animals there.

Why the declaration of “*den of thieves*”? Well, the animals were there for a reason, along with the money changing tables. The priests had become wicked over the years and had figured out a way to make extra money for ‘the service of the Temple’—basically a scheme to become wealthy. Whenever people arrived with their animals to offer sacrifices, the priests had the power to control the transactions. Each offering was supposed to be “*without blemish*.” In order to make sure that was the case, the temple had instituted a checkpoint to make sure people were offering a suitable sacrifice.

When this practice started, it was an honorable thing. However, it had grown into a corrupt system in which vendors were profiting. All the priest had to do was declare your animal unfit for sacrifice, and you were forced to purchase one they had for sale. People in those days couldn't afford to travel back home and pick out a new lamb or bull, or pigeon and dove, so they were forced to buy what was on hand. Once you purchased the supposedly more worthy animal, the presumably blemished one you brought was placed in the pen and sold to someone else entering in. The priest and those in control of the temple had developed quite the monopoly and were able to acquire great wealth in the process, all in the service of God, of course.

Due to this system, poor people had basically become unable to afford to make a sacrifice. They were, therefore, doomed to live with the punishment of their sin. In the Old Testament, in Exodus and Leviticus, God declared what was to be brought in for sacrifices, so that, as He said, “*I may dwell among them*.” (Exodus 29:46). He also had made provision for those who were poor by offering an alternative. If a lamb or bull was too much, you could bring in a pigeon and a dove. God had made the way possible for *all* men, poor and rich, to be able to dwell in His presence.

However, with these new traditions and money making schemes, a poor man found himself on the outside looking in. Because of his lack of money, he was unable to pay the exchange price; thus, he was forever cursed with the sins he had committed, and the consequence was that he was no longer able to commune with God.

Even middle class folks found it difficult. A man would arrive with a lamb for his sin or guilt offering, and the exchange rate left him with only a dove and a pigeon. He felt disgraced because he was unable to provide a proper sacrifice on behalf of his family. So, in shame, he quit trying. Therefore, the temple became a place only the rich were able to afford to enter into. Anyone who tried to earn their way up from the level of poverty were pushed aside as unworthy to enter into the presence of God Almighty.

The people floundered about, thinking God considered them unworthy because they weren't prosperous enough to afford His entry fee. People were on the outside of the temple where God lived, and because of these traditions of men they weren't able to enjoy time with God. God had been made unreachable, and over time, people started to assume that He no longer cared.

Enter God's Agent of Smash, Jesus Christ.

Jesus came, and He loved the poor and weary. He spent his life touching the untouchables. He taught them that God loved each of them and longed to be with them. He declared freedom to those who felt like they were in prison. He declared forgiveness of sins to the ones who were unable to afford the price of admission into the temple. His message resonated in the hearts of the broken and infuriated the minds of those who proclaimed themselves to be the gatekeepers to God.

Many times the priests confronted Jesus, saying, "Who are you to offer forgiveness of sins? Only God can do that!" But what they were really saying was, "You can't offer forgiveness to people; the ones who are privileged to enter into the most holy place of God have to come through proper channels. They have to come through us." How frustrated they must have been to see this man offer forgiveness to people, and turn around and heal them, feed them, or raise them from the dead. Such acts of God were supposed to be available only through the proper channels to God Himself. They were desperate to deny His ability to forgive sins, but when God would heal someone through His touch, it was as if God was validating what He was saying. Therefore, they constantly were seeking ways to kill Him. He was threatening their way of life and their monopoly on God!

What I want you to grasp is that people who were unable to make their sacrifices felt doomed to live a life of disease and illness. They had come to view God as one who punished sins with death, disease, and a life of poverty. So when they couldn't afford to make the proper sacrifice, they made the assumption that God no longer wanted them. Top that off with the Romans ruling over them, and they felt absolutely hopeless. Because of this marketplace in the temple, the poor, the sinner, the unwanted by society, had been left with nothing more than a life of misery. In their understanding, based on the teachings of the priests, God no longer wanted them. What a miserable life it truly was.

Jesus arrived on the scene, and on this day He had finally had enough. People were standing at the gates, longing to commune with God again, but they couldn't afford the price of admission. Jesus looked over the courtyard, one He had seen before, but on this day He grabbed a whip made from cords and He let loose. A rage overtook Him, and He went crazy on everyone

in His path. The priests watched in horror as He tore through their money making scheme. The employees in the courtyard felt the burn of the whip on their backs. The bystanders dropped their jaws at the sight of this madman. The hearts of the desperate people, standing on the outside, watched in gleeful joy as Jesus rampaged His way through it all. Finally, after it was all said and done, Jesus cried out, “This is supposed to be where we can come be with my Father, the one who said He wanted to dwell with us, but you have made it impossible for His loved ones to come in because your greed is so great!”

The priests were so upset about this (John 2:18), they asked that He provide some form of proof that He was God’s Messiah—as if they needed more than all the miracles. Jesus answered and said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (John 2:19)

What foolish men they were, because all they could think about were the bricks and mortar around them. All they thought about were the 46 years spent erecting God’s house, and a crazy man offering to rebuild it all in three days. If only they could’ve understood what He really meant about His body and His upcoming sacrifice, which would once and for all put them out of business.

This Agent of Smash was saying, “You’ve built a barrier between my Father and His people, His treasured possession, and I have come to tear your barrier down!”

Although Jesus messed up the courtyard that day, they put it all back together and kept on doing business as usual. His tirade had only affected a physical change for a moment. However, what He accomplished that day was far greater than what was seen with the naked eye. His actions gave hope to a people who had

been hopeless for so long. His life from that moment on was living proof that God was not under the control of any single group of men or religion. Jesus effected change, and the hearts of the poor, the tired, the broken, and the weary began to beat again. Jesus lived His life with a passion for these people, knowing that the act of smashing He had started that day in the courtyard would soon be completed.

The story of this Agent of Smash had only just begun!



The Ultimate Agent of Smash - God

The Final Barrier

From the very beginning of this study, I knew in my heart we would somehow end up back here. You cannot talk about the Hulk and his story without every battle coming down to the Big Green Guy himself finishing it off. As I watched the cartoon, referenced in the beginning of this study, with my children, I noticed a common thread. *The Incredible Hulk*® would always come down to the final victory, finishing the SMASH! Without him, it would end in defeat.

As we came to a close on this story, I'd already determined how I was going to end it. I figured I would review the stories we had gone over and show how the person involved was literally just a vessel for God to work. After all, without Him they all would have failed. I imagined us doing a week of review on the stories and winding up with how each Agent had to rely on God in some fashion to actually accomplish their victory. But God, He had a completely different plan.

I can imagine you reading this and thinking, "Wow, I really thought he would have used the story of the cross when talking about Jesus, not that tirade in the temple." I was right there with you. I kind of saw myself talking about Jesus and how He smashed sin on the cross. However, God had a much different plan that He was unfolding before my eyes.

On the final Sunday of our study, I had *my plan* all put together. That morning, I found a corner where I could think, and put together my review of the Agents of Smash. As I sat there, God burdened my heart with the cross. I kept thinking, “God, I assumed we'd do that story last week, so why now?” But I relented and started to read. I was suddenly amazed by what I saw. God wanted me to talk about the Ultimate Act of Smashing, and *He* was the Agent.

So, I gathered my family, and we did my review. We went over each Agent, recounting their stories and their acts of smash. We tied each Agent back to God and found that He was actually the Ultimate Agent of Smash. After a build up through all these acts of smashing, each a story of some amazing feat, I asked this question: “So, would you guys like to hear the Ultimate Act of Smashing in the Bible?” In unison, my kids all yelled out, “Yeah!” (Picture a scene of great enthusiasm and excitement!)

Then we read this: Isaiah 53.

***1 Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
4 Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.***

***5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.***

***6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.***

***7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.***

***8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.***

***9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.***

***10 Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him
to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering
for sin,***

***he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.***

***11 After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify
many,
and he will bear their iniquities.***

***12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,***

***and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.***

I don't think I can do much to explain that story. The Ultimate Agent of Smash, God, chose to break down the barrier between Him and His people by crushing his own Son. Twice, in the NIV translation, we see the word "*crush*" (verses 5 and 10). It tells us that it "*pleased the Lord to crush him*". In other words, it brought Him pleasure to do this act of smashing.

Can you imagine the agony of being the one crushed? How is it possible that the Ultimate Act of Smashing, by the Ultimate Agent of Smash, could be that He would crush His very own child? It really makes very little sense, especially in light of the fact that it says, "*He had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth*" (verse 9). He was innocent, yet He was crushed.

Not only was He crushed, He was also "*despised, rejected, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering*" (verse 3). He is also described as one who was "*considered stricken and smitten by God*" (verse 4). He was "*oppressed*" and "*cut off*" and "*assigned a grave with the wicked.*" He was completely cast off by the one He loved the most (John 14:30), and He had done nothing to earn or deserve such treatment. Yet, He was smashed anyway.

If you really follow through on the story, though, you see that He was like a lamb led to the slaughter by a Shepherd that was trusted; therefore, the lamb made no noises. It didn't squirm or try to get free; it simply lay there and allowed the Shepherd to slay it (verse 7). If He truly didn't deserve such horrible treatment, then the only question remaining is, "Why did he let himself be treated this way?"

The answer is found in verses 11 and 12. Hundreds of years before it actually took place (see John 19), the prophet Isaiah tells us why He allowed this to happen. Verse 11 says, *“After the suffering (or travail) of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied”*. Another translation says, “He will see that it is worth it and be glad he did it.” This begs the question, what could possibly make this excruciating pain worth it? How could He call this something that would *“satisfy His soul”*?

In the last part of verse 11, we see why. Simply put, it was you and me that He saw as the satisfaction of His soul. It was because He knew that His willingness to be crushed by God would usher in a new era of many souls being made righteous and becoming His own. Jesus, who Himself was an Agent of Smash, allowed the Ultimate Agent of Smash to crush Him so He could gain the greatest of treasures, you and me!

Our sin and transgressions had put a barrier between God and us. When Adam and Eve took their first bite in the Garden of Eden, God could no longer walk in the garden freely with them. That sin put a barrier between God and His people, and the only way to smash it down was for someone to pay the penalty for that act. If we were ever going to be free to be with God without all the additional barriers that made Jesus go crazy in the temple, a perfect lamb had to be offered on the altar for payment. That Lamb had to willingly offer Himself as payment for that penalty. Jesus agreed to pay that penalty for our sins because He consider us the *“satisfaction of His soul”* (Isaiah 53:11).

Praise be to God for an Agent of Smash who was willing to allow the Ultimate Agent of Smash, God, to crush Him for our freedom. Before that day, and after, there has never again been such a SMASHING story that accomplished so much.

More to the Story.....

In the days following our final look at God and His Agents of Smash, I had the pleasure of recounting the story of our a journey to a few others. I found great joy in telling grown men these stories, all culminating in how God had smashed His own Son. My thoughts on these events had been shaped by years of biblical training and study. I saw them through the lens of my understanding and shared them with the same. Until.....

On the Wednesday evening following our final look at God, the Ultimate Agent of Smash, I took my daughter to a youth group meeting. My habit was to find a corner and read a book. I truly enjoyed these times and looked forward to them every week. It was my chance to find a quiet place for some mental growth. As I was reading on this night, something amazing happened. I cannot recall anything in particular in the book I was reading that sparked this thought, but in an instant, my mind was sparked to ask this question: “Who was the first one to enjoy the freedom Christ provided through his sacrifice on the cross?”

Such a strange question, I mused to myself, until I was struck with this lightning bolt—GOD. God is the first one who enjoyed the freedom Christ provided on the cross!

My mind suddenly went into a tailspin. What was this new thing that was permeating my soul? Why was I instantly as light as a feather and pacing the floor? What was God trying to show me? How could it be that God would be the one set free?

My entire life had been spent with the understanding that Jesus died to set me free from my sins. That was the sum total of His purpose on the cross, or so I thought. My mind raced with

thoughts that a friend had been sharing about the Kingdom of God/heaven. Why had Jesus spent His ministry telling people, “Repent (turn around), the Kingdom of God/heaven is near (or at hand)”? What did He mean by all this? I had been told the kingdom of heaven was a place I would go when I died. Why did Jesus seemingly refer to it as something already here and in us (Luke 17:20-21), and what was this new thing coursing through my veins?

I called out, “God, are you saying what I think You're saying?”

His simple answer was yes, and He began to run the whole of His story through my mind. a story I'd heard a thousand times, but had never fully understood. (Even now I can barely comprehend it.)

God took me back to the Garden. The original paradise He had created for His new creatures. He had given them everything they needed to live and enjoy fellowship with Him. Food was easy to find. Danger didn't exist. Lions and lambs grazed together in the fields, as Adam and Eve sat in the shade. In the cool of the day, God came and walked with His new creatures. They talked and chatted as they strolled through this indescribable paradise. God Himself had overseen the creation of it all, and He had made it perfect for these new little ones He loved so much. He had given Adam and Eve a simple chore, “Rule over this place with me and have dominion over it. Enjoy the beauty I've given you and rest in my everlasting place of peace. I am your King, dear ones, and you are my Prince and Princess!”

What a marvelous wonder God had done in choosing to make Adam and Eve in His image. Not only that, He had given them the honor of being His overseers of this new creation He had

made, and in doing so, He had given them no limits, no boundaries, except one. There was *one* tree He asked them to not eat from, for it held the key to knowing both good and evil. At that point, Adam and Eve knew only good, the Good of God Himself. In that knowledge, both God and man enjoyed an intimate bond that seemed inseparable. God loved His creatures, and they loved Him in return. God was free to walk among His people, and they were free to be in the presence of His holiness without fear.

Until...

One bite, one nibble, one small taste changed it all! With that one small bite, suddenly there was fear and separation. Adam and Eve were afraid of God because they sensed a new darkness when faced with His holiness. A new emotion overwhelmed them, and they ran, trying to avoid being near God!

I needn't recount the whole story, but here's the outcome of that day: Man was no longer free to be near a holy God, but even more importantly, God was no longer free to be near the ones He loved. You see, holiness consumes sin; it literally burns it up. We see this clearly in Isaiah 6, when the prophet enters the presence of God in a *dream*, and in that vision, he could not bear the weight of his sin and the sin of his people. Isaiah felt himself being consumed from the inside out, until a coal was placed on his lips to sear them, thus offering renewed purity.

God's heart was broken as He asked Adam and Eve, "Did you eat of the tree I told you not to?" He already knew the answer, but His heart burst with hope. You see, God knew on that day that it wasn't only that men would be separated from Him, but that He Himself would be separated from His people. His love for them would forbid Him from coming back into the Garden because His purity would cause them to die a horrible and painful death. His

heart shattered when they confirmed their disobedience. A barrier had been raised between God and His people, and His enemy, the Serpent, had brought about this great pain.

However, God in His compassion performed the first ever sacrifice and used the skins to cover the shame Adam and Eve felt in their nakedness. God sadly informed them of the curses that would befall them because of this choice, but He Himself was devastated because He knew what all this meant. He would return to His throne room and, throughout Genesis, God rarely came Himself to walk with His people. He sent His angels, and they reported back to Him how things on earth were going. (Book of Job.) The greatest travesty had unfolded for man and God; they had been separated. God's desire was to dwell among His people, but His holiness and their sin could not freely co-exist.

However, God had a plan. He kept a close and watchful eye on His people, and He often sent messages to them about what He was going to do. God had set in motion a most glorious plan, one that would free Him to be with the ones He treasured once again. That story is found from that moment of the fall in the Garden, all the way to the cross.

God orchestrated a wondrous chorus of events and introduced Himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He made promises to make a great nation, one He could be with. He set in motion a plan to return to His people, but the plan involved many hardships and heartaches. Think of Joseph being sold into slavery. Think of how the Egyptians turned on their invited guests and forced them over the years into slave labor. God's people were feeling the effects of that little bite, and in their suffering, they cried out to Him, and He heard.

God sent Moses, and the people of Israel walked out of Egypt with blessings beyond measure. They watched God defeat their enemies at the Red Sea and march them forward on dry ground. During the day, they saw His glory in a great cloud, and at night, He stood with them as a pillar of fire. Once again, God was with His people.

He led them to Mt. Sinai and there spoke to them. His voice boomed from the mountain, and He delivered ten simple commandments for them to follow. The people celebrated and cheered this amazing God, but their ears ached from the sound of His voice, another side effect of that one nibble so many hundred of years before. Because their heads rumbled in pain at the sound of His voice, they cried out, *“We will follow you, but please speak only to Moses and let him bring us your words.”* (Exodus 20:19)

God desired so much to enjoy unity with these people whom He declared His *“treasured possessions,”* but He agreed to speak to them through Moses because He didn't want them to suffer any pain. Therefore, God took Moses up on the mountain, and there He laid out a plan for a place to be built for Him to once again be with His people. He had chosen a small nation, a weak nation, as His own, and He had perfected a plan for Him to be among them. The Tabernacle Tent designs were given to Moses, and in Exodus 29, we see God's purpose for it. He told Moses to build this just like he had been told, to consecrate Aaron and his sons, to institute a daily sacrifice of two lambs, for this purpose: *“So that I may dwell with my people.”* (Exodus 29:45)

God's heart was revealed in those eight words. God longed to be with His people again. He longed to live with them, talk with them, and take strolls in the Garden again. He wanted them to enjoy the fullness of His presence, and He intended to make them

a blessed nation which the rest of the world would envy because He was with them. However, it wasn't the perfect situation.

Although the people could see the Cloud by Day and a Pillar of Fire by Night, they still were not able to enter into the presence of God. At Mt. Sinai, God had Moses set up a barrier around the mountain that the people could not cross. The reason God set this up was out of love for them. No man was able to touch the holiness of God and live, so the barrier was set up to protect them. This same barrier went into the design of the Tabernacle in the form of a thick curtain. This curtain would act as the necessary barrier to protect the people from God's holiness. God was once again with His people, but it wasn't quite the intimate walk they had enjoyed before.

Sadly, because of the fall into the knowledge of good and evil, the people of Israel consistently broke the 10 laws given them. At one point God, out of love, even told them to go on by themselves in the promised land. (Exodus 33) His reason was this, *"You are a stiff-necked people, and if I go with you, I might destroy you along the way."* In other words, He knew they were incapable of keeping their end of the bargain, and His holiness would wipe them out. However, Moses begged and pleaded with God, saying he himself would not leave without God, so God relented, but it required a system to be put in place. Therefore, the sacrifices were instituted as offerings for sin and guilt, so that God could remain with His people. Sin and holiness didn't mix, so when they sinned, God gave them a way to purify the sin through the shedding of blood, which was how He could remain in the midst of His people.

This situation worked for a while, but problems again arose from it all. Even when Solomon was able to build God a *"permanent house"* in Jerusalem, there was always that curtain. God was living in the middle of His people, but no one was able to

enter into His holy presence. Only the high priest was allowed to enter in the holy of holies to make atonement for the people on a very limited basis. This very fact caused even greater problems than had been known before.

Because a human controlled access to God, corruptions and evil arose from it all. The priests became greedy and full of evil intent. They lorded their position over the people and brought oppression among them. Because God was regulated by His love to remain behind a curtain, men began to charge admission fees in order for people to make themselves right with God. This power and corruption infuriated God, and many times throughout the stories of the Old Testament, God severely punished those who were blocking access to Him. He sent death and disease upon them and cursed their families with great indignation. Time and again, God allowed His people to suffer pain and captivity, even allowing His very own Ark of the Covenant to be carried off, because of these atrocities. God had come back to be with His people, but for Him, it was still not like the Garden!

Enter Jesus Christ, God's very own Son, the image of God made into the image of a man. When Jesus arrived on earth, the people of Israel had lived hundreds of years in darkness and sadness, going from one captivity to another, all because they had forgotten how much God loved them. Others had manipulated God into a corner and were profiting from their positions as priests or teachers of the law. Rome had conquered the known world, and Israel fell into their hands. The poor, the oppressed, the weak, the lonely, the rejected, the forgotten people, began to ache for the God of the ages, the One they had heard so many wondrous stories about. They longed to be near Him in His House, but the curtain and those standing on the outside of it made it sound as if it was no longer possible. Hopelessness had set in, but God wasn't finished yet.

God created the world and made creatures in His own image so they could enjoy one another—the people enjoying God, and God enjoying His people. He had gone out of His way to make it possible for Him to return to their side. Yes, the law was stringent, but His holiness was pure. Yes, the sacrifices were costly, but the reward of being able to dwell with His people was worth it. At times, both sides enjoyed great fellowship, but that blasted curtain was simply causing more problems.

You see, God had made the barrier a curtain several inches thick. He had chosen to make it only as thick as necessary for His people to be protected from His Holy Presence. He gave them all they needed to keep it as simple as possible, but man, in his foolishness, kept adding to the thickness of the curtain.

The ones charged with keeping the peace between God and man became the very ones causing prayer to be impossible. They read the law and made it more and more oppressive. What was meant to be simple became difficult and nigh impossible to keep. Greed and prosperity crept in, and the guardians became the enemy. People began to lose hope, until Jesus arrived.

Walking onto the scene in a very humble fashion (born in a manger, known as the illegitimate child of Joseph and Mary), a simple man began to say profound things. Following in the footsteps of a wild man, John the Baptist, this Jesus of Nazareth said, “Turn Around, the Kingdom of God is near!” (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14-15). In other words, God’s kingdom is *here!*

Those were revolutionary words. People had read and heard of a Messiah coming to set them free. Their assumption was that they would experience an earthly kingdom in which God would reign, but Jesus was saying something much more extraordinary.

He was saying, "God is here, just look and see. God is about to do what all of you have been waiting for; He's about to institute His rule and reign on earth, and it will last forever!"

What they didn't know is that God was about to reopen the Garden of Eden.

Jesus gave people cause for hope. Others, like the Pharisees and priests, he gave cause for fear. (Mark 11:18) No one was exactly sure what this man was going to accomplish, but they knew whatever it was, it was going to change their lives forever.

To get back to the Ultimate Act of Smashing, we must see the tie-in to it all. God created humans to rule with Him in his very own image. He made it so they could walk together without any issues because of His holiness. They were free to enjoy a life of complete unity and harmony. Satan came to steal this away and, by his actions, deceived humans into a place of separation between God and man. Satan's purpose was to inflict as much pain on God as possible, and there was no greater way than to make an intimate relationship between God and His creatures impossible. Satan succeeded for a moment; however, God would not give up His people so easily.

So God implemented a story for the ages, a story of redemption. A story of freedom. He came Himself to live in a tent, far from the throne room we imagine, "*so that He could dwell with His people.*" He protected His people with the institution of a barrier because of His great love for them. However, this barrier, this curtain, did not allow for the glorious walks God and His creatures once enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. God no longer wanted to live behind a barrier, but in order to change that, there

had to be a great sacrifice. God Himself had instituted the payment for sin in blood, the blood of one without blemish.

God knew what it would take, so He turned to His Son and said, "Son, I long to be out from behind this curtain and walk among my people again. My heart aches to be their God and no longer be separated because of their constant mistakes. I have made a way to dwell among them, but I want to walk with them. There's only one way this will work, and that's if I'm willing to give up something that's most precious to me. Son, will you go and live with them and show them my perfect plan for their life? Will you show them how to live a life free from worry and care, in the embrace of My arms? Will you give up this place of glory, go be with them, walk with them, embrace them in their sicknesses and sorrows, and ultimately die a most gruesome and horrible death, so that I can break free from behind this barrier and be one with them again? How about it, Son? Are you willing to do that for Me?"

Jesus looked around at all the glory he enjoyed. What a difficult thing it would be to leave all of that behind and go fulfill the law and the prophets. His very own Father was asking Him to give up immortality to become mortal and actually face the hardest test ever given. If He accepted, and in His new-found fleshly body failed just once, He would forever be separated from His Father and all the glory then surrounding Him. This was no easy decision, and the perfect life He would have to live would be no cakewalk. He knew the serpent would do his best to cause Him to stumble, just like Adam did, and the temptations would be great. Taking this on meant He had no promise that He would ever see his Dad again, unless He was perfect!

I know He must have wrestled this through His mind over and over, until He looked into the loving eyes of His Father. He knew by Himself, as a man, it would be nigh impossible, but with

His Father guiding His way, all things were possible. Moreover, He saw the desire and love in His Father's eyes, and He knew He had to do this because He loved His dad so much. If being able to be one with His people meant so much to His dad, He had to try. So, Jesus looked at His dad and said, "Yes Dad, I will go and do this for you!"

So, He humbled Himself and became a man. He lived a life of sorrow and oppression. He was despised by many and rejected by most. He was considered stricken by God and smitten. He became afflicted with our sicknesses, throwing up, and suffering headaches for the first time. His body was attacked by all forces, inside and out. The temptations were great around Him, and His yearnings as a man tortured Him every single day. Yet, He lived at the feet of His Father, seeking not His own self will and gain, but He had a prize set before Him! That prize was immense in its size and eternal in its value, but between it and Him stood a cross of shame and agony. He retreated to hillsides alone to ask His Father time and again, "Is there any other way, Dad?" (Luke 22:42)

He never backed down from His mission and goal. He wanted to please His Father and give Him the gift He was after. He was offered the world with all its fame, popularity, and riches (Luke 4), but He chose affliction, rejection, and sorrows. He could have ruled this earthly kingdom and had it all, but His heart longed for something greater, something beyond just Himself. When He was thirty, that longing began to become evident as He walked around enjoying the unity with God that His Father longed for us to have. He showed us a life lived for others and for something more than selfish ambition. He could have owned it all, but He preferred to be with His Father instead, which meant He could accomplish what His Father had sent him to do.

So, on the cross, in the greatest of agonies and suffering, He felt the darkness creeping into Him. He felt the life of His physical body slipping away, having endured one of the most horrific beatings any man could suffer. His breaths were shallow and labored, and His body racked with pain, yet even there He found it in Himself to offer forgiveness once again to a thief hanging next to Him. As His life slipped away, He also sensed His greatest fears overtake Him as His own Father turned His back to Him. “Daddy, Daddy, why are you forsaking me?” He cried. The questions flooded His human mind, as He wondered if his sacrifice would be accepted. Did He accomplish His goal of fulfilling the law of Moses and the Prophets? (Matthew 5:17). Was he perfect like His Father required? As His life flashed before His eyes, clinging to life on the edge of death, He looked up one more time and said, “Dad, I did it! I have made it possible for You and Your people to be together again. I did what you asked me to do. It is ***finished!***” Then, He gave up His life so we could once again experience it without any barriers between us and God.

As He spoke these final words, the earth trembled in their wake. The sky grew dark and fear gripped all who looked on. Women screamed out in agony, and heathen men wondered if they had killed the Son of God. Blood and water flowed from His side, and Satan screamed in horror because he knew what was coming. As the priests ran for cover in the shaking temple, God reached up and grabbed the final barrier keeping Him away from His people, and with a shout of glory and victory, ***He shredded that curtain from top to bottom!*** As He tore His self-imposed barrier of protection, which had become a barrier of oppression, between Him and the loves of His soul, God yelled out with a loud voice,

“FREEDOM!”

Points of Clarification

Now, I'm sure there are some people shaking their heads at all this, saying, "What do you mean God needed to be set free? I thought Jesus came to set us free from our sins." To answer your concerns, you're right. Jesus did come to free us from our sins; the New Testament is full of this truth. However, that's only half the story of the Gospel of good news. That's the half of the story I grew up with and found such freedom in knowing. However, it's only part of the story.

God had no need or requirement to be free from any sin or wrongdoing like I did. He had no need to be freed to be God. He has always been the Almighty, Holy One. He didn't need freedom from anything, but He did long for it. He longed for the freedom to walk among His people again. He longed for those cool evening chats in a place where He no longer had to be behind a curtain of any kind. He wanted to be able to be with His people and not be concerned that His holiness would consume them any more. For that to happen, He had to pay a high price, one only He could afford. No amount of lambs, bulls, goats, pigeons, or doves would ever fully satisfy His requirements to be with us again. They were a temporary solution to a major problem.

Therefore God decided to pay the debt Himself, and He offered up His own Son, who willingly agreed to His plan to make our intimacy possible again. With a final burst of breath, Jesus claimed it was over, and His Father instantly showed His agreement by leaving the Most Holy Place. (Matthew 27:51, Mark 4:37-38, Luke 23:44-46) God exited the building and declared by His actions, "I will never again be separated from my people by a barrier that I have set up. My holiness has been fully satisfied and I am now free to be *one* with my people!"

What a glorious and remarkable story God unfolded before our eyes. He said He would set free the captives and prisoners (Luke 4:18-19, Isaiah 61), and He accomplished all He started. Adam and Eve's choice had not only made us prisoners, but it had also forced God to be a prisoner of His own Holiness. In order for Him to enjoy dwelling as one with His people again, enjoying walks in the garden with them, an enormous price had to be paid. God went through hundreds of years of an embarrassing home in the form of a tent, and then a building of stone and mortar. He then breathed His own existence into an even lower form, that of a human baby, in the flesh of man. He endured the afflictions we all face daily—allergies, colds, sweat, stench of body odor, and more—all so that His Father would no longer have to love us from behind a curtain. His Dad desired to be walking alongside us once again, and Jesus made it all possible through His humble birth, lowly life, and miserable death. But once Jesus had accomplished the goal, God burst forth in joy and laughter, knowing His enemy's plan had been defeated permanently, and His desire to be with me and you, and walk with me and you, was now possible.

I wish you could be on this side of the page and know the absolute elation I feel when I think on these things. Unfortunately, words have no way of expressing true emotion. They can evoke it, but rarely can they express it. Just think, God's plan of salvation was not only so I could be with Him again, but He had His own purpose, to be back with me! His love for me is wrapped up in His all-consuming desire to hold my hand and walk in the garden again, and today, right now, the Kingdom of God is *here*. I don't have to wait for some far off, distant land to enjoy time with Him. No, He's *here* right now, and of all places, *inside of me*. He broke free from His brick and mortar temple and went to the temple He longed to be in the most—*me*!

Are you starting to grasp the full weight of joy this story bears?

God no longer has to be apart from me based on my performance or ability to keep His enormous law. He's free to stand right beside me in my greatest filth. When I drop to the lowest of lows and commit unspeakable atrocities, He no longer has to flee behind a curtain. No, He sits there and holds me just like I am. He embraces me in the midst of my stench and my grime and says, "Because my Son paid the ransom for you and fulfilled my Holy requirements, there's no more curtain, or priest, or law, or tradition that would make my Holiness burn you up; therefore, I can hold you just like you are."

What I'm sharing is not a new thing, but rather something that's new to me. Many through the ages have told of this wonderful story; it was what gave such life to the disciples, Paul, the early church, and those like Brennan Manning, Rich Mullins, Keith Green, and countless others. This is an age old story, but one that the Enemy would prefer to have stay behind a curtain.

I truly hope you, the reader, and those you meet and tell this glorious story to, can experience the wonder and fullness of this great love story. I hope this permeates your very core and that, because of it, His love pours forth from you to all those around you. I hope you understand how great the lengths and measures that this Ultimate Agent of Smash went to in order to embrace you in His arms. I hope that love causes you to say along with me, "I believe that this encounter with this Ultimate Agent of Smash means my life can never be the same!"

In Conclusion:

The sad truth still exists that we have an Enemy who's desperate for us not to know the whole truth of God's story of *smash*. He works every single day to try and mend the torn curtain to keep us from the freedom offered in this story. I know that for years I lived a torn life, torn between how I longed to be (perfect) and who I was (imperfect). I was told God couldn't dwell with a sinner, but no matter how much I tried, I kept falling into sin. My parents taught me that a half-truth was nothing more than a lie, and living with only half this truth, that Jesus came to free me from my sins, still left me wanting more. I longed to be free so I could walk with Him, but my mistakes kept me at bay. I heard a constant whisper in my ear, "You'll never be good enough!" Unfortunately, I fell prey to this half-truth, and I lived a life filled with despair. If God required perfection in order for me to enjoy fellowship with Him today, then I was doomed to live a miserable life and only know the joy of fellowship when I died.

This half-truth stole my joy and kept me bound in chains. I dared not invite anyone to walk the same path because I felt nothing more than misery. I kept all the laws I knew to keep, obeyed and did the best I could, hoping it would be enough to consider myself acceptable for heaven in eternity. I hoped I would enter in the gates, but if I was honest, I was never quite certain I was going to make it. My sins far outweighed my righteous acts. I knew Jesus had paid the price, and I placed my faith in Him to pay my debt for me, but in my heart, I longed to live the life He spoke of, a life more abundant. He said we could do the same things He had done, and even greater, but all I knew was how far from His level of life I was. Honestly, I had started to believe the ability to live a worry-free, carefree life in the arms of God was actually something only Jesus, the Son of God, would ever enjoy. He

spoke of times alone with His Father and hearing from His Father, but was that actually possible for me?

Now that He has shown me this *smashing* story from His point of view, my life has been radically changed. I realize now what Jesus meant when He said, “*I have come to give you life, and life more abundantly.*” I’ve tasted the living water, and now I’m forever free. Does the world still have its own cares and concerns? Yes. Do I still take my eyes off this glorious story and look at the waves about to overcome me? Yes. However, their power has been fully broken. I may stumble, but I can never fail because my God lives in me. I no longer have to attain perfection, but I strive for it out of love for the one who first loved me. If God was willing to pay such a high price in order to have me in His arms again, I in return desire nothing more than to give Him my every passion and breath. I no longer strive for perfection to gain His approval, or even to keep it. I strive for the goal set before me because of one thing: **love**.

May the peace of God and the glory of His face shine down upon you forever and ever! Amen.

Calling All Agents of SMASH to Arise:

As I pictured all the above events on the day Jesus died, I had a hilarious reality strike my mind. When the curtain was torn, the greatest fear of the priests and Pharisees became real. They were the ones every man had to go through to get to the one, true, living God, because He was behind their curtain. Therefore, they held much power and control. With the wave of a hand they could change the entire culture of a nation and the fate of every man.

Sadly, the people of Israel had fallen prey to their schemes and lies, until Jesus showed up. Out of nowhere, this son of a carpenter was shaking up their little kingdom. He was telling people God was no longer unreachable, but was rather standing right beside them. His actions were backed up by the miracles He performed, and their comfortable, cozy life of power was slipping away. If what this crazy man, as they called Him, was saying were true, then they would soon be out of a job and forced to do labor in the fields like every other man. That frightened them and put them on edge. That's why they were constantly looking for ways to trap Him, shut Him up, discredit Him, and even kill Him. If you look at it from their point of view, it's almost understandable. They held the keys to God in their hands, and they felt their grip on piety being pulled away.

The truth is, when they saw the torn curtain, and realized God had left the building, they only had one choice—they had to sew it back up. If they wanted to hold on to some form or fashion of their lifestyle, they had to keep God under wraps, or at least make people think they had.

So they sewed up the curtain, then resumed their reign with lies and deception. They forced guards to lie about the body being

stolen, and closed the temple doors until they could repair the damage. Imagine hearing the truth from those guards about how He burst forth from the tomb, and yet still trying to figure out how to save their old way of life. It's almost unbelievable that they didn't simply run to Jesus and believe.

The fact remained that God had left the building, and they had to keep it under wraps or they would be forced to join the common man, the very people they had oppressed and kept away from God. Therefore, lies were spread as they clung to the only reality they had, and in the process they missed the only *hope* they had of truly living a full and blessed life.

Did they keep their monopoly on God? For some they did, the ones they were able to deceive. Keeping it up meant shutting up the likes of Peter, James, Paul, Bartholomew, John, and the rest of the disciples. In most cases, that meant killing them and threatening all who dared believe this story that Jesus was risen from the dead. Unfortunately, their plans backfired, and instead of quelling the fire, their actions threw fuel on the fire and it spread faster and faster.

Their scheme to cover up truth in order to maintain control has continued on down through the ages. Although God is no longer contained behind a curtain due to His holiness, His love has been covered over due to man's greed and desire to be in control. The lie that God is unavailable still exists despite the gift of the Holy Spirit, which literally is God Himself with us, in us, and breathing through us.

The only purpose for perpetrating these lies is that Satan wants us to live a life of bondage and miss out on the freedom gained through the sacrifice of God's Son. Through the hearts of men, who long to be famous, popular, and wealthy in this world,

Satan enacted his last desperate grasp to maintain this barrier between God and His people. He helped the Pharisees and the priests spread lies and restore the temple with brick and mortar. No longer was God's presence behind the curtain, but that fact had to be kept a secret. With this lie, Satan started his final hope, using the very building God once called home to maintain the separation between God and His people.

History tells us that time and again, men in their laziness and foolishness fell prey to this lie. They again began to believe a priest or preacher was the gateway to speak to God. They were told they couldn't enter in themselves and that every sin was keeping them from God, even after salvation. A desperate hopelessness and corruption once again fell over the people, not only in Jerusalem, but across the world. Men had done all they could to shove God back in a box and behind a veil so they could control, manipulate, and deceive the minds of the poor, the needy, and the weary.

Thankfully, God hasn't run out of Agents of Smash. Throughout the history of mankind He has continued to send them as needed. He started with His disciples and carried on with the likes of Paul and Timothy. Then later in history, He raised up men like Martin Luther and William Tyndale. He sent forth men like William Carey, George Muller, and Hudson Taylor in times when people were held in captivity. He released men like C. H. Spurgeon, Billy Sunday, David Livingston, Keith Green, and Billy Graham. He raised up women like Amy Carmichael, Helen Keller, and Isabel Kuhn. Little known agents like Samuel Morris and people we've never heard of before have come and gone, all with the same purpose. They came to tell people God is no longer behind a curtain, but rather, He's free to come and dwell with His people, and they with Him. Just like in the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, the Kingdom of God is truly here.

The same lies and deceptions about God and the curtain still exist today. People are driven to a hopeless life of burdens and meetings and seeking to live the unattainable life of perfection. Men rise up offering the way, if only you bring your tithes and offerings to their facility and sit and listen to their voices. Exciting shows with lights and smoke attract people to come and worship God, but when the music fades, people are left wondering if that's all there is. People are desperate to know God personally and see His power move in their lives, but they're told that's not possible in our day and age.

They pick up the next book offering hope and life, if only you follow the guidelines they have set before you. They cling to the next sermon, series, or song that seems to draw them closer, until the feeling is no more. They clamour for the next big thing, hoping it will lead them to the life Jesus spoke of, a life full of abundance. They give their money, their time, running themselves ragged until they realize they have run in vain.

They know, because they've been told, that they've been saved for life eternal, but they long for life now. They're told they can only know peace and joy if they follow all the rules and pay their portion in the forms of tithes and offerings. They're told they will experience glimpses of life if they give themselves to serve in a building on a corner. They're told they will find satisfaction in going on mission trips and giving to others, while they watch a few men grow in fame and popularity behind a pulpit. They're led to believe, by a lie in their ears, that they're not smart enough to understand the Bible unless they complete training and learn Greek and Hebrew. Leaders are told not to trust the common man and his testimony, as it may possibly lead others astray. Slowly, Satan, by using unsuspecting men, has sewn the curtain back together.

Exhausted, these tired and worn out sheep collapse in a heap, with nothing left to give. In a moment of desperation they shake a fist at God and cry out in frustration, “God, where are you?”

In the stillness, in the silence, they hear a whisper, “Dear Child, I’m not behind a curtain anymore. No priest, no pastor, no sermon, no book, no one man has the answer. I’m right here, inside of you where I’ve been all along. When my Son died, I tore the barrier that kept us separated into shreds. I’ve opened the gates to my kingdom through my Son, and we’re free to walk together once again. You no longer have to be afraid of me because of your failures, I only see perfection when I see you. You may feel the sting of disappointing Me, but our ability to walk together no longer depends on how good you are. All I ask of you is that you rest at my feet and trust Me.”

When they hear that voice of truth and realize God is with them, then and only then are they fully free!

Satan will never stop his efforts to deceive us and have us live a life full of impossible regulations and laws. He will forever be trying to sew up that curtain. But God - God has a never-ending supply of Agents of Smash at His disposal to tear down those puny little veils.

Be ready, men and women of God, for the time will come again. Satan and his minions will always attempt to shove God back into a box of religion, rules, and regulations. Today, God is again raising up his Agents of Smash to present the truth that was accomplished through His Son and His Ultimate Act of Smashing.

He’s calling you and me to rise up. Not to attack, but to love like Jesus loved. He’s calling us to tear down the barrier by

building up those who are broken, weary, and worn out. He's calling us to SMASH the lies, not by force, but with the truth of His glorious love and residence in the temple of our souls. He's calling us to change the world and show them the truth, just like Jesus did!

Until the day His Son returns, He is calling us to rise up. He is forever calling His.....

AGENTS OF SMASH!

Bonus Thought

I hope and pray you have enjoyed the study through God's Agents of Smash. I pray it has caused you to realize the lengths God himself has gone to to be with you. I pray you have seen the barriers that He is willing to crush and break in order to hold you closely.

That being said, I want to point out a very important fact before you charge off and attempt to do some smashing for God. A closer look at each agent shows one undeniable reality. They were all simply humans who God chose to use. Each one was just a man, but when something specific happened, God was able to use them to do mighty things.

What was that one simple thing? It was when they were overcome by the Spirit of the Lord! Then and only then were they allowed to be used as God's agents. Look at each of them closely.

Nehemiah - He prayed and asked for favor from God in the eyes of the king and he received it. He prayed and asked God to bless him for his acts of anger against sin and God blessed him.

Samson was a man born to do great things. However, each time he performed a superhuman feat, it was always after the Spirit of God came over him. By himself, without God's spirit, he was easily defeated and brought down low. But when he prayed and remembered it was by God's strength he was made strong, he accomplished more in his death than in his life.

Gideon was a man of fear and anxiety. He was uncertain of God's calling on him and questioned God constantly. However, once he chose to obey and trust God, God moved on his behalf

and eradicated the enemy from the land of Israel. God even told him this was going to be His story so only He could have the glory throughout the ages.

Balaam and his donkey were a funny story to read. However, it was through the gift of God that the donkey could see the angel sent to oppose Balaam and once Balaam could see, his path of hastiness was changed and he spoke as God told him to. I just recently reread this story and again was amazed at how the Spirit of God came over Balaam when he blessed the Israelites and how his words were the exact ones given to Abraham several hundreds of years before: "May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed." (Numbers 24:9)

Elijah was a man who spoke the words of God against a man/king who wanted him dead. He was bold to proclaim God's words, but he also was only a man. He hid and fled from death and trusted God to provide for him. Once facing the king and the prophets of Baal again, he prayed and God did what only God could do. Without God, Elijah would have been nothing more than a man full of hot air, but because he prayed and trusted God, fire fell from heaven and God proved himself once again.

David was a man known to have a heart after God's own heart. He mentioned in his story that it was God who had delivered the lion and bear into his hands while tending sheep, and he approached Goliath in the power and might of the Lord. He did not declare that he would defeat the giant, but that God would deliver Goliath into his hands. This was a boy who trusted in God to do the impossible and it happened.

Satan was nothing more than a prop in God's hands to bring about a fundamental change in Job. Job was relying on his ability to keep the law as what would bring blessings upon him and

his family. God wanted Job to trust in Him and Him alone, so he sent Satan to destroy everything that Job believed so God could reveal himself and his depths to Job. Satan, though turned loose on Job, was only allowed to do as God commanded, so even he was under the strict authority of God to do the things that would ultimately accomplish God's purpose.

Jesus, though he was God's son, did not rely on his status to do mighty works. He was constantly giving himself to prayer and to seeking out the will of His father. He called upon God to do mighty works through him and then trusted his father would act on his behalf. When he stepped into the temple that day and lost his temper so to speak, he was moving in accordance to what God desired him to do. He once said "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." (John 5:19) So even in this act of smashing, he was doing the will of the One who had sent him.

I point all this out so that we can know how immensely important it is for us today to seek God's face when opposed by our great opposition. We live in a country/world where it seems God is no longer able to move and do mighty works through men. However, God is simply waiting on someone, anyone, who will call desperately upon His name to do a mighty work and break down this barrier of unbelief that separates God from His people. This barrier that is keeping us from knowing God in his fullness and that is keeping God from displaying His mighty hand through his people. God is looking for a man or woman who will once again believe He is able to do abundantly above all we ask or think according to his power that is within us. (Ephesians 3:20)

Although we live in a day and age where all seems hopeless, with God there is always hope. And God, as proven

through these stories from biblical days, loves to use common men to do very uncommon things. If we will give ourselves to pray, and seek His face, and trust in His power, He will once again break through these man made barriers and smash down our walls of unbelief and once again be one with His people.

So I ask again, are you willing to be that one who God can use as His Agent of Smash through the power of prayer and by being overcome by the power of His Spirit?

To God be the glory, great things He has done and once again will do!

