

THE BOOK OF JUDGES

God Raises Judges to Deliver His People

Judges 1-9

INTRODUCTION

Israel – A Theocracy

At the time of the Exodus and the Conquest of the land, the main form of government among the nations was *the monarchy*. Each nation or state was ruled by an earthly king. The king's word was the law. He ruled his people, according to the law that he had established.

When Israel entered into a covenant with God at Mount Sinai, it was understood that **God was their sovereign King. His Word was the Law.** At Sinai, God spoke His Ten Words, the Ten Commandments, and He established His Covenant Law. As King, God ruled Israel according to His Law, and through divinely appointed human beings. Both Moses and Joshua were not self-appointed leaders. Aaron and his descendants were not self-appointed priests. They were chosen and called by God to serve as His **divine mediators**.

Israel was consecrated to God, set apart from among all the nations, to be different. It was to be governed not by a *monarchy*, like other nations, but by *theocracy*. The word *theocracy* comes from the Greek word *theokratia*, which means "the rule of God." In a theocracy, God is King, and His Word is the Law.

The Time of Judges

After the Conquest of the Land (as recorded in the Book of Joshua), we enter a dark period in the history of Israel, called the *Time of Judges*, as described in the Book of Judges. It began with the death of Joshua (c. 1245 B.C.); and ended with the prophet Samuel, the last judge of Israel, and the anointing of Saul as Israel's first king (c. 1045 B.C.). For about 200 years, Israel existed as a loose confederation of twelve tribes.

There are three major themes in the Book of Judges. *The first theme is the rapid apostasy of Israel.* Before his death, Joshua begged the people to remain faithful to God. He said,

"Strive diligently to keep and to do everything written in the Book of the Law of Moses, lest you turn aside from it to the right or to the left, and lest you go among these nations, those that remain among you. The names of their gods shall not be mentioned among you, and neither shall you worship them, nor serve them; but you shall cleave to the Lord your God as you have done to this day... Therefore, take great heed to love the Lord your God..." (*Joshua 23:6-13*).

Despite Joshua's advice and warnings, Israel will disobey. They will fail to conquer the land, to drive out the Canaanites, and to stop the abominable rituals and practices

associated with their idol worship. Within one or two generations, they themselves will returned to idol worship.

The second theme of the Book is continued patience and faithfulness of God. God continues to deliver His people, even though they have turned away from Him and have forgotten Him.

The third theme of the Book is the re-occurring cycle of rebellion, bondage, repentance, deliverance, and peace. Each cycle begins with the Israelites doing evil in the sight of the Lord, forsaking Him, and serving other gods. God then punishes them by allowing their enemies to oppress them. Crushed under bondage and servitude to an enemy, the people repent and cry out to God. God then raises us a judge to deliver the people. Then, a time of peace and security is granted. After a while, the cycle begins again.

STUDY AND REFLECTION

Introduction: The Failures of Israel (Judges 1:1 to 3:6)

With the death of Joshua, Israel found itself in a whole new situation.

The assembled tribes and armies had left Gilgal; and had moved into their designated territories in the Promised Land. So, the tribes were no longer living close to one another, encamped around the Tabernacle and God's Divine Presence among them.

Although the land was generally conquered under the leadership of Joshua, it was not fully conquered and occupied. Each tribe was now responsible to complete the conquest and occupation of the land in their own tribal territory; to tear down the pagan altars and "high places" and to stop the abominations that were taking place in the worship of Canaanite gods. Under the leadership of Caleb, Judah and Simeon were the only two tribes that really followed through with this task. All the other tribes failed to occupy their assigned territories; and they continued to co-exist with the Canaanites.

For the first time since the Exodus, there was no central figure like Moses or Joshua, no strong leader appointed by God to govern the twelve tribes. Instead of a central authority, each tribe was to govern itself, according to the Law. Moses had appointed a leader (elder) for each tribe and a system of commanders and officers. The leadership of each tribe was responsible to judge their own legal cases.

Although the Tabernacle was set up permanently in **Shiloh**, it was no longer the central focus in the daily life of Israel. The Tabernacle was far away, and out of sight. So, people began to establish their own "high places" and altars for worship. These "high places" undermined the centrality of the Tabernacle as the place of worship, according to the Covenant Law.

Finally, the people began to co-exist and intermarry with the Canaanites. Within one or two generations, the Israelites broke their covenant with God and failed to live according to His commandments and laws. They committed spiritual adultery, by turning to the worship of Baal, Asherah, Molech, and all the other gods of the

Canaanites, even sacrificing their children, in the hope of securing economic wealth and prosperity that the Canaanites enjoyed. “Every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

The Judges of this period were not “court judges” as we understand the word today. *The Judges of Israel* were tribal leaders, rulers or “saviors,” who were chosen by God and anointed by the Spirit to deliver (save) His people in times of oppression and injustice, or to carry out His established plan. During the period of Judges, there were a total of fifteen judges (leaders).

Othniel (3:7-11)

Othniel was the first judge of Israel. He was either the nephew or younger brother of Caleb. (Caleb was one of the twelve spies sent by Moses to the land of Canaan). After the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, Othniel freed Israel from the rule of Cushan-Risathaim, king of Syria, who oppressed the Israelites for eight years. Then the land remained at peace for forty years – until Othniel died.

Ehud (3:12-30)

After the death of Othniel, the Israelites fell back into disobedience and “did evil in the sight of the Lord” (3:12). So, the Lord gave Israel to Eglon, the king of Moab. The Israelites served king Eglon for eighteen years.

The next judge was called *Ehud*, which means “where is the glory?”. Ehud was a skilled left-handed warrior from the tribe of Benjamin. He strapped a sword on his right thigh under his clothes. In this way, he deceived the palace guards and was able to bring the sword into king Eglon’s royal chamber. Ehud said that he had a “secret message” for Eglon, and then, when he was able to get close enough, he drove the blade all the way into Eglon’s stomach. In the ensuing confusion, Ehud’s army was able to conquer the Moabites and drive them out of the land. This was followed by eight years of peace.

Shamgar (3:31)

Shamgar killed six hundred Philistines with an ox goad, an ancient cattle prod that looks like a spear. Did he kill them all at once? Probably not. Most likely over the time of many battles or conflicts.

Deborah (4:1 – 5:31)

Deborah was both a prophetess and a judge. Her name means “honey-bee,” and she was the wife of a man named Lappidoth. Deborah was the only female judge.

After the death of Ehud, the Israelites again “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (4:1), so God handed them over to Jabin, the King of Canaan, who ruled in Hazor. With his military commander Sisera and an army of chariots, Jabin oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. The people finally repented and cried out to the Lord God for help.

As a tribal leader and judge, Deborah summoned Barak, the son of Abinoam, to command the Israelite army. Barak gathered an army of 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, and he slaughtered Sisera's entire army.

But Sisera managed to escape on foot and he hid himself in the tent of a woman named Jael. While Sisera was hiding under a blanket, Jael drove a tent peg through his head, fulfilling Deborah's prophecy.

The Israelites eventually defeated King Jabin, and there was another forty years of peace.

After the victory, Deborah wrote a song celebrating what God had done, and honoring the Israelites in the victory over the Canaanites. Known as "The Song of Deborah" (Judges 5), it is believed to be one of the oldest passages in the Bible.

Gideon (6:1 – 8:32)

Gideon is one of the most well-known and important leaders from the Book of Judges. There are more verses dedicated to him than any other judge.

The name "Gideon" means "hewer, slasher, hacker," but in Judges 6:25-32, Gideon earns another name, Jerubbaal, for tearing down idols to Baal and altars dedicated to him. The Israelites who worshipped Baal wanted to kill Gideon, but his father Joash told them to let Baal defend himself. *Jerubbaal* means "let Baal contend with him."

In Gideon's time, the Israelites had once again returned to idol worship, and God used the Midianites to punish them for seven years. "Like swarms of locusts" (6:5), the Midianites would attack, ravaging farmlands, destroying the crops, and killing everything in sight. To protect themselves, the Israelites hid in caves and dens in the mountains. Finally, they repented and cried out to the Lord God for help.

At the time of their repentance, God sent a prophet to remind the people what He had done for them. The prophet is referred to as "the angel of the Lord." He appeared to Gideon and commanded him to save Israel:

"The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor... Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian" (6:12-14).

Gideon resisted, saying that his clan was the weakest in Manasseh, and that he is the least in his own family. He asks for a sign to confirm that this is truly the will of God. The angel of the Lord touched his staff to some meat and bread, and it caught fire. Then the angel of the Lord disappeared. This was the first of many times that Gideon asked God for a sign and received one.

Shortly after this, God told Gideon to destroy his father's altar of Baal and the Asherah pole beside it, and to replace it with an altar dedicated to the Lord. Gideon was afraid, so he did it at night. The next morning, everyone wanted him dead. Joash, his father, said: "If Baal is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been pulled down" (6:31). From that time on, Gideon became known as Jerubbaal. Both names are used in the Book of Judges.

Sometime after this, the Midianites joined forces with the Amalekites and other enemies of Israel. They crossed the river Jordan and encamped in the valley of Jezreel.

Then, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon (6:33-34). He sent messengers to the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet him, to prepare for battle.

Then Gideon asked God for a sign, to confirm His promise from before. First, Gideon put a wool fleece on a threshing floor and said:

“If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on the ground, then I shall know that You will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said” (6:37).

And it was so. In the morning, the ground was dry, and the fleece was full of dew. But Gideon was still hesitant, so he asked for another sign. He said to God:

“Let not Your anger burn against me, let me speak but this once; pray, let me make trial only this once with the fleece; pray, let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.”

And God did so that night. The next morning, the fleece was dry, and on all the ground there was a dew. This time, Gideon accepted the sign and believed.

As Gideon prepared to fight the Midianites, God said:

“The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, “My own hand has delivered me” (7:2).

And so gradually, God whittled Gideon’s army down from 32,000 men to 300 men. The Midianite and Amalekite armies were encamped in the valley below, “thick as locusts,” and “their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.”

Understandably, Gideon was afraid, so God told him to sneak into the camp and to listen to what the troops were saying. When Gideon did this, he overheard a man telling his friend about his dream. He man said: “Behold, I dreamed a dream; and lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat” (7:13).

His friend answered: “This is no other than the sword of Gideon, the son of Joash, a man of Israel: into his hand God has given Midian and all the host” (7:14).

When Gideon heard this, he returned to the camp of Israel and said: “Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand” (7:15). He now had the confidence to execute his battle plan. His 300 men surrounded the camp, and when Gideon gave the signal, they all broke jars, blasted trumpets, raised torches, and shouted, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” (7:20).

Then God caused the Midianite soldiers to turn on each other, and they fled. Gideon sent messengers to Ephraim (an Israelite tribe which had not yet been called to fight), and the Ephraimites killed two Midianite princes.

Gideon pursued the two kings of Midian, routed their armies, captured them, and executed them.

After this victory, the Israelites attempted to make Gideon their king, saying: “Rule over us – you, your son and your grandson also – because you have delivered us from the hand of Midian” (8:22). But Gideon refused, proclaiming: “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you” (8:22).

But as a favor, Gideon asked them all to give him one of their gold rings, and he had them melted down and made into an ephod – a garment used in oracle-related rituals. He put it in his city, in Ophrah; “and all Israel played the harlot after it there.” They used it to obtain oracles or messages from false gods. “And it became a snare to Gideon and to his family” (8:27). Even before the death of Gideon, Israel had gone astray once again.

In the days of Gideon, there were forty years of peace. And as soon as he died, the people of Israel turned again and played the harlot and returned to the worship of Baal and the other gods of the Canaanites.

Abimelech, the anti-Judge (8:33 – 9:57)

Abimelech was the young son of Gideon, by a slave woman from Shechem, the tribal territory of Ephraim. His story is a story of an “anti-judge.” Abimelech persuaded the people of Shechem – who formed a major city in Israel – to throw off the rule of Gideon’s descendants and to make him the sole king. This they did. They slaughtered all the sons of Gideon, except for Jotham, the youngest, who invoked a curse upon Abimelech and managed to escape. Abimelech’s rule was brief and ill-fated. Soon, a civil war flared up, which took the lives of both Abimelech and the treacherous leaders of Shechem.

That ends our Bible Study today, Judges 1-9. We looked at the first six judges of Israel. In the following session, we will continue with the next six judges, and complete the Book of Judges. The lives of the last two judges of Israel, Eli the priest and Samuel the prophet, are described in the first book of Samuel.

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