

THE BOOK OF JUDGES

God Raises Judges to Deliver His People

Judges 10-21

REVIEW

The Time of Judges

In the previous session we studied the first half of the Book of Judges, chapters 1-9. In this session, we will study chapters 10-21 and complete the Book of Judges.

In review, after the Conquest of the Land and the death of Joshua, Israel entered a dark period of its history called the *Time of Judges*. This period lasted about 200 years, beginning with the death of Joshua (c. 1245 B.C.); and ending with Samuel, the last judge of Israel, and the anointing of Saul as Israel's first king (c. 1045 B.C.). During this *Time of Judges*, Israel existed as a loose confederation of independent tribes.

There are three major themes in the Book of Judges. *The first theme is the rapid apostasy of Israel from God, and moral decline in the life of Israel.* The Israelites failed 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 returned to idol worship, and no longer follow the commandments of God. The Book of Judges ends with these words: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." God was no longer their God and King, whom they worshipped; and they no longer followed His Law.

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 up a judge to deliver the people. Then, a time of peace and security is granted. After a while, the cycle begins again.

Just a reminder, once again, that the judges of this period were not "court judges" as we understand the word today. The judges were tribal leaders, rulers or "saviors", who were chosen by God and anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to deliver God's people in times of oppression and injustice, to carry out His established plan.

During this era, there were a total of fifteen judges. In our previous session, we looked at the first six Judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, and Abimelech (the anti-judge).

In our session today, we will look at the next seven Judges: Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. The lives of the last two Judges of Israel, Eli the priest and Samuel the prophet, are recorded in the First Book of Samuel.

STUDY AND REFLECTION

Tola (10:1-2)

Tola, son of Puah, was a “minor judge.” He is referred to as a “minor judge” because Scriptures do not say much about him. He led Israel for 23 years after the death of Abimelech, Gideon’s son. Tola was from the **tribe of Issachar**, and his grandfather was a man named Dodo. When Tola died, he was buried in Shamir.

Jair (10:3-5)

Jair was the judge that rose after Tola. He was from the Gilead, and he led Israel for twenty-two years. He had thirty sons who ruled thirty cities in the Gilead. When died, he was buried in Kamon.

Jephthah (10:6 – 12:7)

After Tola and Jair, the Israelite territories east of the Jordan, known as the Gilead, were being threatened by the renewed Ammonite kingdom. The Ammonite army had encamped in Gilead; and the people of Israel came together and encamped at Mizpah, a town in Gilead, south of the river Jabbok. The leaders of Gilead said to one another, “Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead” (Judges 10:18).

In time, the Ammonites made war against Israel. And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of the tribes of Gilead (Reuben, Gad, half of Manasseh) went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob.

Jephthah was a might warrior from the **tribe of Manasseh**. He was the son of man named *Gilead* and a prostitute woman (a harlot), whose name is not given in the Scriptures. When she gave birth to a son, Gilead took the child and raised him in own house. Gilead’s legal wife also bore him sons. When his wife’s sons grew up, they thrust Jephthah out, saying, “You shall not inherit in our father’s house; for you are the son of another woman” (Judges 11:2).

Jephthah fled from his half-brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob, where he kept company with outlaws, became their leader, a lived a *Robin Hood* type of existence. He gained his military experience by conducting raids, moving from one place to another.

When the elders of the Gilead came to Jephthah, the said to him: “Come and be our leader, that we may fight the Ammonites... and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead” (11:6-8). Jephthah agreed. He went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them.

As the new head of the tribes of the Gilead, Jephthah became an effective military leader. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him (11:29), and he defeated the Ammonite

king and subdued the Ammonites. However, before going into battle, Jephthah made a foolish and rash vow to the Lord. He said: “If you will give me the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering” (11:30-31).

Tragically, this turned out to be his only daughter (11:29-40). The text tells us that Jephthah did fulfill his vow. Was his daughter sacrificed as a burnt offering? We do not know for sure. Since human sacrifice was forbidden by the law, Jephthah may have consecrated his daughter for life service to the sanctuary in Shiloh, at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (see 1 Sam 2:22). This would have been equivalent to being a whole burnt offering before the Lord.

After the defeat of the Ammonites, another tragedy occurred. The tribe of Ephraim crossed the Jordan, to fight the tribes of Gilead for not calling them to join in the battle against the Ammonites. Jephthah gathered the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim and destroyed their army. Those trying to escape were slaughtered at the fords of the Jordan river.

Jephthah’s “rule” over Israel was short lived, only six years. When he died, he was buried in his city in Gilead.

Ibzan (12:8-10)

After Jephthah, Ibzan of Bethlehem became a judge in Israel. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He judged Israel seven years. When he died, he was buried in Bethlehem.

Elon (12:11-12)

After Ibzan, Elon, from the ***tribe of Zebulun***, judged Israel for ten years. When he died, he was buried in the land of Zebulun.

Abdon (12:13-15)

After Elon, Abdon the son of Hillel judged Israel for eight years. He was a wealthy man, with forty sons and thirty grandsons. When he died, he was buried at Pira’thon, in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

Samson (13:11 – 16:31)

Samson was the thirteenth judge in Israel, and the last to be recorded in the Book of Judges. The lives of the last two judges of Israel, Eli the priest and Samuel the prophet, are recorded in the first book of Samuel.

Samson was the son of Menoah and a member of the ***tribe of Dan***. He was a man of great strength. This strength came directly from the Spirit of the Lord and it enabled him to do numerous supernatural feats – including the final one that led to his death.

Samson is one of the few people in Scripture who had a miraculous birth. His mother was unable to conceive, but the angel of the Lord appeared to her and announced that she would conceive and bear a son. The angel instructed her to raise him as a Nazarite, a man who throughout his life would be consecrated to God. This consecration including three things: no cutting of hair; complete abstinence from strong drink, wine, and even grapes and grape juice; and no contact with dead bodies or anything unclean.

In time, the woman bore a son, and called his name Samson. The boy grew and the Lord blessed him. “And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him” (13:25).

Samson's marriage to a Philistine Woman

When Samson came of age, he went down to Timnah, a Philistine city, to find a wife.

In Timnah, he saw a woman that he liked. He returned home and told his father, Meno'ah, “I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah; now get her for me as my wife” (14:2) But his father and mother said to him, “Is there not a woman among the daughters of your kinsmen, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumscribed Philistines?” (14:3). But Samson said to his father, “Get her for me; for she pleases me well” (14:3). Then Samson and his parents went down to Timnah, to make the arrangements for betrothal.

On his way to the woman (for the betrothal), Samson went into the vineyards of Timnah, where a young lion roared against him. Question: Why did he stray into the vineyards? He should have stayed away from the vineyards to avoid temptation and to maintain his Nazarite vow. When the lion came towards him, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson and gave him great strength; and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands. Samson did not tell his father or mother what he had done. He went down to the woman with his parents to arrange for the marriage and to celebrate the betrothal.

After some time had passed, Samson returned for the marriage ceremony and feast. On the way he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and he found a hive of honeybees in the carcass of the lion. Again, according to his Nazarite vow, he was not to have contact with a dead body. Nevertheless, he went ahead and scraped out some of the honey into his hands, and went on, eating as he went; and he came to his father and mother, and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the dead lion.

Having returned to Timnah for the wedding, Samson prepared a wedding feast, which most likely included wine. (According to the Nazarite vow, Samson was not to drink wine). Thirty Philistine men came to the feast to be his companions and to celebrate together with him. Samson said to them, “Let me know put a riddle to you; if you can tell me what it is, within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty festal garments; but if you cannot tell me what it is, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty festal garments.” And they said to him, “Put your riddle, that we may hear it.”

And so, Samson gave them the riddle. He said, “Out of the eater comes something to eat. Out of the strong came something to sweet.”

For three days, the men were unable to solve the riddle. On the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, "Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?" (14:15).

Over the next several days, Samson's wife wept before him, begging him to reveal the riddle. On the seventh day of the feast, Samson finally told her, because she pressed him hard. Then she told the riddle to the countrymen. And the men gave Samson the right answer on the seventh day, before the sun went down. So, Samson said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle" (14:18).

Then the Spirit of the Lord came in power upon Samson again, and he went down to Ashkelon, a Philistine city close by, and killed thirty men living in that city. He took their spoil, and their garments, and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle. In hot anger he left his wife in Timnah and returned home to his father's house.

Samson's vengeance on the Philistines

Presuming that Samson rejected his wife and left her for good, the father gave his daughter in marriage to Sampson's best man at the wedding.

After a while, at the time of the wheat harvest, Samson returned to visit his wife. But the father would not allow Samson to visit her. He said, "I really thought that you utterly hated her; so, I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister fairer than she? Take her instead" (15:2).

So, Samson said to them, "This time, I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines, when I do them mischief" (14:3).

He went and caught three hundred foxes and took torches; he tied the tails of each pair of foxes together, and he put a torch between each pair of tails. Then he set them free into the fields of the Philistines. The fire quickly spread and burned down all the grain fields, the vineyards, and olive orchards. When the Philistines found out who started the fire, they came and burned Samson's wife and his father-in-law to death with fire.

Samson then said to them, "If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged upon you, and after that I will quit" (15:7). So, he smote them with a great slaughter; and then hid himself in the cleft of the rock of Etham.

The Philistines gathered an army to retaliate. They came up and encamped in the land of Judah and made a raid on a place called *Lehi*. And the men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" They said, "We have come up to bind, Samson, and to do to him as he did to us." Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etham, and said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?" What then is this that you have done to us?" (15:11).

Samson then allowed the men of Judah to tie him up and take him to the Philistines. When the Philistines saw him, they came out shouting to meet him, and the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson with power. "The ropes on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and the bonds melted off his hands" (Judges 15:14).

Samson found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and taking it into his hand as a weapon, he slew one thousand Philistine men. When he had finished, Samson was very thirsty, and he called upon the Lord for help. God heard his prayer and split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and there came water from it; and when he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived (15:18-19).

Samson was judge in Israel for twenty years.

Samson and the Harlot (16:1-3)

After years had passed, Samson went down to Gaza, a Philistine city. There, he saw a harlot, and he slept with her. When the people of Gaza found out where he was, they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him at the gate of the city. They kept quiet, saying, "Let us wait till the light of the morning; then we will kill him" (16:2).

But Samson arose at midnight. He went out and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them some forty miles, to the top of a hill near Hebron.

Samson and Delilah (16:4-31)

After this, Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the valley of Solek, a valley that served as a border between the Philistines and the Israelite tribe of Dan.

When the lords of the Philistines found out about the affair, they came to Delilah and said to her, "Entice him, and seen wherein his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver" (16:5).

So, Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me wherein you great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you" (16:6).

And Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings which have not been dried, then I shall become weak, and be like any man: (16:7).

So, she tied him up with seven fresh bowstrings, while the Philistine men hid themselves, lying in wait to capture him. When Delilah said to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He snapped the bowstrings. So, the secret of his strength has not known.

Delilah then said to Samson, "Behold, you have mocked me, and told me lies; please tell me how you might be bound." And Samson said to her, "If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak, and be like any other man."

So, Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and said to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" The Philistines were lying in wait to capture him. But Samson snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.

Then Delilah said to Samson, "Until now you have mocked me, and told lies; tell me how you might be bound." And he said to her, "If you weave seven locks of my head with a loom and make it tight, I shall become weak."

So, while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove it into her loom. And she made them tight with a pin, and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep and pulled away the pin and the loom.

This continued for some time. Delilah kept pressing him hard with her words, day after day. Finally, Samson revealed to her the secret behind his strength. He said to her: “No razor has ever been used on my head, for I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother’s womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man” (16:17).

Delilah then put him to sleep on her knees.

She then had the Philistines come in; Samson’s hair was cut; and the seven locks of hair were shaved off. As soon as the seven braids of his hair were removed, Samson’s strength—and the Lord—left him (Judges 16:19).

The Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles. They brought him down to the city of Gaza. Samson was put into prison, where he ground at the mill. But as time passed, his hair grew back again (16:22).

So, what was the significance of his hair? Samson’s vow as a Nazirite was unusual. It was meant to be a life-long consecration to God. However, during his lifetime, the three key elements of his vow as a Nazirite were progressively broken by Samson. The cutting of the hair was the climax, the last element of the vow. Once the hair was cut, the vow was completely broken, and the Lord left him.

Samson was not supposed to have contact with a dead body (Num 6:6-8). Yet he ate honey from the lion’s corpse (Judges 14:5-9). Samson was not supposed to drink wine or strong drink, or even eat grapes (Num 6:3-4). Yet he walks through a vineyard on his way to Timnah, and he hosts a great wedding feast at Timnah (Judges 14:10-20). Finally, no razor was to touch his head (Num 6:5). Samson allows Delilah to cut off his hair (Judges 16:13-22).

Samson’s tragic fall is the result of his threefold transgression on his lifelong Nazirite vow. Also, in the whole Delilah affair, Samson shows great foolishness in not recognizing that Delilah means him harm and intends to betray him.

The death of Samson

The Philistines celebrated and praised their god, Dagon, for delivering Samson to them. All the rulers gathered at the temple to Dagon, and three thousand Philistines watched from the roof. As part of the celebration, they forced Samson to perform. Then they put him by the pillars supporting the temple, and Samson asked a servant to move him to where he could feel the pillars so that he could rest against them.

Samson prayed:

“O Lord God, remember me, I pray You, only this once, O God, that I may be avenged upon the Philistines for one of my two eyes” (16:28).

And then Samson ripped out the two pillars that supported the entire temple, and it collapsed, killing everyone including Samson (16:29–30). Right to the end, Samson’s

motives in his conflicts with the Philistines were personal rather than religious or national. In each case, he sought personal vengeance.

Samson's whole family went to retrieve his body, and they buried him "between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father" (Judges 16:31).

Samson had judged Israel for twenty years.

Although Samson did win a great victory over the Philistines in his death, he proved to be a poor and unsuccessful leader for the people of Israel. Samson had a weakness for Philistine women. He did not always follow God's commands, nor did he maintain his Nazarite vow. He is a tragic figure, a man who lacked self control. This prevented him from achieving any lasting success as a leader of God's people.

The movement from the first judge, Othniel, to the thirteenth judge, Samson, is a movement more-or-less downhill. Othniel was a model judge. All the others were marked by something unusual. The early judges Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon seemed to have provided good leadership for the people. After the disastrous reign of Abimelech, the time that judges judge becomes shorter and shorter. Jephthah's rule is marked by civil war. The minor judges after Jephthah, had only brief careers.

Samson was barely a "judge" at all but, rather, an independent champion and troublemaker. Israel was slowly disintegrating, sinking more and more into idolatry and into moral corruption. After a few generations, there was little difference between them and the Canaanites that they had conquered.

The Abuses of the Time of the Judges (Judges 17-21)

The Book of Judges ends with two narratives about events that may have occurred earlier in the time of Judges but have been moved to the end by the sacred author to make an important point.

The first narrative is about a man named Micah of the tribe of Ephraim, a wealthy man who set up a private shrine in his home and eventually persuaded a certain Levite from Bethlehem to serve him as his personal priest and chaplain.

The tribe of Dan, unable to secure its assigned territory by driving out the Canaanites, wanders through the hill country of Ephraim in search of a permanent home. They came upon Micah's shrine and they took everything with them, including the priest.

The tribe of Dan then moved on to capture the city of **Laish** in Galilee, and they settled there, with Micah's shrine as their permanent place of worship. The priest was a descendent of Moses, but he was not a descendent of Aaron.

The whole story reveals the complete disregard for the Law of Moses, which forbade the use personal or tribal shrines; and which also forbade Levites not of Aaron's line to serve as priests. The sacred author of the Book of Judges is making an important point: Israel is not only in apostasy, **it is no longer following the Law of Moses**, including the Worship Laws. Liturgical chaos reigned during the period of the Judges.

The second narrative (story) is of a Levite connected to Bethlehem in Judah. A Levite from territory of Ephraim took a concubine from among the girls of Bethlehem. While

travelling from Bethlehem to his home in the hills of Ephraim, he stopped at a place called Gibeah, the main city of the tribe of Benjamin. No one provided hospitality; an old man, who was staying in Gibeah, took them in for the night. Then, they are treated as the angels were treated in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). The people of Gibeah had become as morally decadent as the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Men of Gibeah surrounded the house where the Levite was staying as a guest. They demand of the host, the old man, to have relations with his guest-visitor.

The Levite's concubine was handed over to them. The men physically and sexually abused her until she died. When the Levite returns home, he cut the dead body of his concubine and sent pieces to each of the other tribes with an appeal for justice. This then led to civil war.

The tribes were outraged; and they gathered at Mitzpah to go to war against Benjamin. After a few initial defeats, the combined army of Israel destroyed the Benjaminites and sacked their capital, in the same fashion that the people of Jericho and Ai were slaughtered. The men of Benjamin were almost completely wiped out along with the whole tribe. Only six hundred men survived; and after returning to their land, they acquired wives by warfare and abduction.

So, the sacred author closes the Book of Judges with a story marked with some of the most shocking depravity and moral decadence in the Old Testament. This is the kind of social and moral anarchy that took place when "there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

The horror of the book of Judges is the ugly face of rampant religious and moral relativism. With moral relativism, anything goes.

This concludes our study of the Book of Judges.

In our next session, we will study the Book of Ruth, a short book, with only four chapters. Nevertheless, it is a beautiful story about family, friendship, and loyalty.

Prepared by Father Peter Babej