



An Introduction to the Book of Judges

The Bible is a library of books organized by genre of literature. Judges is part of the historical books, giving the ancient record of God's work amongst His people and reports what happened after the death of Joshua. Believers Church Bible Commentary says, *"Judges bridges the important gap between the conquest of the land of Palestine and the formation of what might actually be called the nation of Israel."*

Most Christians have little to no real understanding of the book of Judges outside of a few minor details about the most famous characters – Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. It is a dark, gory, and unsettling series of stories. The book paints the pattern of human sinfulness in serious terms that sound a lot like our own day – deeply flawed political and spiritual leaders, people seduced into lethargy by a soft life of plenty, and a God who keeps trying to help people who don't seem to care much for Him.

In the United States, there is a clear difference between political leaders, military leaders, religious leaders, and the legal system. In the Old Testament, God's people did not have such clear distinctions. The Bible was their lawbook, the King was supposed to also be their spiritual leader, and some leaders were also warriors like King David who led worship, wrote Scripture, killed men in combat, and judged cases of right and wrong. Regarding Judges, Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary says, *"The Hebrew title of the book is translated as Judges. The name relates to the deliverers of the tribes of Israel following the conquest and until the time that a king ruled in Israel. The book's name makes one think of a law court with a presiding judge, but legal decision was only a part of what the judges in the book of Judges did. The judges were also military leaders, a fact supported by Judges 2:14 and 4:5. The judges also had a special empowering by God to accomplish their civil and military tasks."*

The author of Judges is uncertain, but some Jewish and Christian scholars have suggested perhaps it was Samuel who wrote or compiled the book.

Judges is a cyclical book showing patterns of behavior between God and people that remains consistent in various times and places during the influence of various leaders. Bible scholar George Schwab says, *"Judges describes in detail six of the twelve judges (a hundred verses for Gideon), but not the other six (Shamgar gets a single verse). The first group are the 'major' and the second the 'minor' judges. Part 2 treats all the judges; chapter 10 covers the minor ones as a group."*

To understand the book of Judges, nine themes are helpful.

Theme #1: God relentlessly pursues His rebellious people. Throughout the book of judges this is an overarching theme. The people of Israel continue to choose the path of disobedience in choosing to worship the idols of the culture around them, yet God in His mercy chooses to bring them back from their own destructive ways.

The book of Judges illustrates this tension: God promised he would never break His covenant with His people, but He is also holy and just and promised He would punish sin. Through their disobedience, Israel had put God in what seems to be a double bind. The underlying question in the book is, "How will God be able to keep both of these promises?". We will see that God uses fallen people (Judges) as instruments of His grace. Each of these flawed judges uniquely foreshadow God's ultimate answer found at the cross. God would one day send a just "Judge" in His Son Jesus. Christ's death on the cross would fulfill God's faithful promise to keep His covenant by taking on all our sin

and imputing us with His gift-righteousness. Thereby satisfying the justice of God by punishing sin and maintaining His covenant promise to His people by giving us His righteousness.

This is good news for the church today. The character and nature of God is that he loves us so much that he'll never quit running after us and pursuing us.

The Minor Prophet Hosea illustrates God's relentless pursuit of His rebellious people. To illustrate His love, God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer. So, in obedience Hosea marries her and she is repeatedly unfaithful to him. But God commands Hosea the prophet to pursue her and take her back. At one point in the story, she's being sold on the auction block. Hosea sells everything he has to buy her back. God says "that is a picture of my love for you. I will relentlessly pursue you even when you rebel against me." This is the God of Judges. He is full of mercy, long suffering and more loving than we can imagine. He never gives up pursuing His rebellious people.

Theme #2: Obeying God leads to blessing and disobeying God leads to disaster. In the first five books of the Bible, commonly referred to by Jesus and others as the "law", there are 613 commands given by God. Judges reports how God's people violated many of those laws, especially the book of Deuteronomy. God commanded His people to drive the pagans out of the land, but instead they enslaved and kept them. God commanded His people to destroy the Canaanite places of worship, and an angel quotes that very Scripture to rebuke the people for not doing so. God commanded parents to evangelize and disciple their own children to become believers, but an entire generation grew up not knowing God. God commanded His people to not marry the demonic Canaanites, but they angered God doing this very thing.

Judges repeatedly mentions the sins of the people over and over. The dictionary of Biblical Imagery says, "We see the cycle in Judges, where in response to Israel's sin, the Lord repeatedly 'sold them into the power of their enemies round about' (Judges 2:14; cf. 3:7, 12; 4:2; 6:1; 10:7; 13:1). The process reaches a climax in 2 Kings 17, when Israel is finally deported to political bondage in Assyria."

The story of Judges is intended to motivate us to repent of sin in our life, turn to God, trust in God, and get up every day to take the next faithful step in our lifelong walk with God. The story of Judges is this – when we do not walk with God, we walk into trouble and our family, and friends follow into tragedy. Judges shows us that one drop of disobedience will lead to an ocean of disaster. Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary says, "*The book might be viewed as just a series of stories or a history of failures in Israel. But the book should be seen as prophecy—not prophecy that tells the future, but prophecy that exhorts God's people to live better lives and not to repeat the mistakes of the past. No book in the Bible is just history, for all history in the Bible is seen as illustrative of spiritual truth, especially of God's sovereignty over history to bring his salvation to the human race.*"

Theme #3: Comfort and ease cause people to wander from God. The pattern in Judges is that God blesses people, they become entitled and ungrateful, fall into sin, rebel against God, and even pursue other demonic false gods. The last line of Judges is the summary of this: *Judges 21:25 – "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* Some of the people suffering the worst persecution and poverty have the most passionate faith. Sometimes, being desperate for God keeps your soul in a place of prayer, worship, faith and expectation. Think back on your own life - did you pursue God more passionately when you were in times of comfort or times of crisis?

Theme #4: Satan is very much alive in the world and seduces God's people. Throughout Judges, God's people continually wander into the worship of the demonic false god Baal and follow the sexual and spiritual practices of the nearby ungodly Canaanites. Powerful demonic spirits work through everything and anything from religion to spirituality, politics, education, and entertainment to lure people away from pure devotion to the one true God. These powerful demonic forces are referred to as a "god" or the "gods" throughout Judges. Demon spirits parading as false gods work together under Baal the chief god of the Canaanite legion. His name is translated with terms like, "master", "lord", and "owner." The Bible, including Judges, speaks of both Baal, and Baals. Like any business, government agency, or military fighting unit with human beings, demonic divine beings in the unseen realm also have a chain of command. At the top is the demon "Baal", and working under them are the various demon "Baals". Although demons are not male or female with a physical body like human beings, Baal appears as a male demonic deity. Throughout the Bible, including Judges, when you see Baal followed by another name, it is often a location over which that demon has dominion. For example, Judges mentions "Mount Baal-hermon" (3:3), "Baal-berith" (8:33, 9:4), and "Baal-tamar" (20:33). Baal was considered the most powerful demonic deity and god of wealth, prosperity, and success. This explains why he is often mentioned first among other demonic deities in the Bible. Throughout Judges, Baal is also often mentioned as working with Ashtaroth, or Asherah. This demon appeared as a female and the goddess of fertility and sex. Also known as Venus, she was the highest ranking Canaanite demonic goddess and considered the passionate lover of Baal. The worship of Baal and Ashtaroth included sex without any limits, pleasure and indulgence of every kind, and even child sacrifice. God's people kept falling back into this sin and the pattern continues to this day with the constant lure of wealth, power, success, pleasure, comfort, sex, indulgence, and pornography. Our new days have the same old demons.

One Bible commentary says, *"Judges also contributes to the understanding of how contemporary culture and other religions can bring immense pressure upon the people of God. The battle is with the world system that pressures believers, successfully at times, to reject God. The book of Judges emphasizes that a key problem for Israel was forgetting God's great acts of the past, especially the Exodus from Egypt. The Passover and all of Israel's feasts were designed to keep the people remembering God's great redemptive acts. When they forgot what God had done in the past, they inevitably excluded God from their present."*

Theme #5: We are often our own worst enemy. Throughout Judges, the people truly have no one to blame for their hardships other than themselves. If we are honest, the same is often true of us. We have all made choices that have caused pain in our own life. Much of this comes from being impulsive, chasing pleasure or comfort, or becoming bored with life and ungrateful to God. This is the backdrop of Judges who kept chasing sex, pleasure, and excitement. The Believers Church Bible Commentary says, *"For the Israelites during this period, life was difficult and undoubtedly mundane. People generally clustered in small villages, temporarily moving when necessary to small dwellings on their farmland. Daily responsibilities depended upon the season, but common activities included sowing, pruning, harvesting, threshing, and grazing. The average diet consisted of in-season produce with only an occasional serving of meat. Communication of any kind was laboriously slow, and people rarely saw anyone outside of their own tribe. Such a life was often trying and overridden with routine."*

Theme #6: Everything rises or falls with leadership. Throughout Judges, when there are godly leaders, things get better for a season, and when there are ungodly leaders, things get worse. For

the most part, God's people throughout Judges struggle to produce good leaders, and their one attempt at a king was a disaster. Much like our own day, there were far too few godly capable leaders in government or the church. Modern readers of the Bible tend to think of God's people in the Old Testament as unified, which is only true some of the time. When there is a strong leader, they pull the nation together as happens with Moses and Joshua, for example. After those men die, however, and the days of the Judges emerges, there is no such singular head with the influence to pull all of God's people together under their leadership. Bible scholar Terry Brensinger writes, (in Judges) *"what we find are more localized leaders and a somewhat disjointed collection of tribes, apparently held together by nothing more than a common understanding of their identity...Not until the rise of the monarchy in the face of increasing external pressures does this situation change significantly."*

As you read Judges, it is helpful to remember that numerous judges are ruling at the same time in various parts of the nation of Israel. In today's terms, this means that while national elections and leaders are important, the people leading in our homes, churches, schools, businesses, and communities are incredibly important. They do not have the power to make national changes, but they do largely determine if our lives and families are in a healthy or unhealthy environment. Judges painfully paints a painful need; without godly Spirit-led leadership, cultures only decline, and people only fail.

Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary says, *"The book was designed to illustrate three problems: (1) incomplete conquest; (2) unfaithfulness to God's covenant; and (3) civil chaos...The problem of civil chaos is noted in the phrase 'the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes,' which is linked to the phrase 'in those days Israel had no king.' These phrases sum up the situation in Israel (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) and expose two sides to a common problem—the problem of civil chaos. It was the king who would solve the problem of the people doing whatever they wanted. The king would bring an end to the civil and military defeats that came from the people's unfaithfulness to God's covenant... Judges shows that God's people desperately needed a Spirit-anointed leader."*

Theme #7: God does perfect work through imperfect people. Often, when leaders in the Bible are depicted, there is a tendency to treat them like superheroes who are seemingly inhuman and near perfect. This results from a very shallow and superficial reading of the Bible. For example, Noah got drunk and passed out naked after the flood, Abraham was a polygamist who gave his wife away twice, David was an adulterer and murderer, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and even Peter bossed Jesus around and later denied Him altogether. One encouraging theme of the Bible is that God is perfect, and He does perfect work through imperfect people. Reading Judges shows that even believing, Spirit-anointed leaders have clear faults, flaws, and failures. For example, Samson is a powerful man who is also profoundly flawed.

Theme #8: The only way for everything to hold together is by keeping God at the center. Only twice does the book of Judges report God's people asking God for direction. Repeatedly, the people do what they want without consulting or considering God.

Judges 2 reports following the death of Joshua, *"another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his*

anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. They quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors, who had been obedient to the Lord's commands. Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel..." Judges 2:10b-20a

The results of not having God at the center of life are catastrophic. When God is at the center, lives hold together. When anyone or anything else is at the center, lives fall apart. A Bible dictionary says, "*Judges portrays the geographical and religious situation of the Israelites after Joshua's death. It is a collection of primarily hero stories that emphasize the weaknesses of Israel's leaders and God's patient compassion. The narrative also illustrates God's punishment of His people when they turn from worshiping Him to worshiping Baal and living immorally. This punishment usually consists in domination by another people. Each story is set within a framework involving five steps, commonly referred to as the 'Judges Cycle,' of sin, repentance, and salvation:*

- 1. Israel does evil and worships the Baals.*
- 2. God becomes angry and hands Israel over to an enemy nation.*
- 3. Israel cries for help.*
- 4. God raises up judges who deliver Israel from the enemy.*
- 5. Israel returns to foreign gods."*

Theme #9: God is extremely patient. The period of Judges is roughly 300 years, from the Late Bronze II age until the Iron I age (roughly 1400-1100 B.C.). Throughout this long period, God patiently deals with His rebellious people from generation to generation. Like a loving Father who allows a bit of hardship to encourage a heart change in a stubborn and rebellious child, God never fails in His loving pursuit and correction of His people. In Deuteronomy 4:25-26, God warned them saying, "*When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, so as to provoke him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you..."*" He also promised that if they cried out to Him in distress, no matter how far they had wandered, like the story of the Prodigal Son, He would embrace them saying in Deuteronomy 4:28-31, "*you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice. For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them."*

Theme #10: The Christian faith is one generation away from extinction. The haunting line of Judges 2:10 says, *"After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel."* The historical period that Judges records, between the death of Joshua and the rise of King David, was incredibly difficult. God's people forgot much of their past history. They knew little about God delivering them from Egypt in the days of the Exodus, and many did not know the Scriptures. This is, in large part, because they married Canaanite women, which means you had unbelieving mothers raising sons and daughters who were supposed to learn Hebrew and have their education based upon the Old Testament.

Today, the practical lessons from Judges are threefold. 1. Personal: Walk with God daily and do not wander into season of sin and fall away. 2. Marriage: Marry someone who walks with God so that you can follow the Lord together. Put God at the center of your marriage and honor Him by loving your spouse. 3. Parenting/family: Raise your children to walk with God by reminding them of God's grace, goodness and faithfulness. Let them see a genuine faith at work in your life.