

May 22, 2016
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Judges
Community Baptist Church
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THEY DID WHAT THEY THOUGHT WAS RIGHT
(An introduction to a study through the book of Judges)
Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25

We come now to one of the important historical books of the Bible. This study will reveal not only God's work with the nation of His choosing, Israel, but it will reveal to us many important truths about God's character. The book is full of stories. They are not just stories about stuff that happened to ancient Israelites. Nor are these simply records about strange coincidences that overtook the fledgling nation that was trying to establish their homeland. These are stories about God busily working in the midst of His people to reveal the greater story of His purpose in creation.

If you like to hear pleasant stories that always have a happy ending, this book will not be to your liking. If that is your desire, you would probably do better to watch movies on the Hallmark Channel. The narratives found in these pages paint a true picture of humanity with all its ugly blemishes of unfaithfulness and selfish intrigue. This book is a bit like the response of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, when he sat to have his portrait painted by Sir Peter Lely. He told the artist, "Paint my picture truly like me, warts and all." If Cromwell actually said such a thing, it is not verifiable but has made for a good colloquial saying.

With just such accuracy God paints the portrait of His people who promised to be loyal to the covenant into which He drew them. It is not a pretty picture. Sadly, it is the picture of all humanity. Though God created the human race for His own glory and to enjoy fellowship with Him, giving glory to Him and walking in fellowship with Him as not been characteristic of our race. Instead of loving God and desiring His fellowship, we naturally reject Him and serve

ourselves. And sadder still is that people whom God has drawn to Himself and delivered from their sins often do not show love for their Lord and Savior any better than those who reject Him outrightly.

Is there any hope for such a fallen race? There is. Our hope is in the God who controls all things for His glory. This God, our Creator, is faithful to His promises and warnings. Therein is our hope. God will do what He promised. He proved that to the ancient Israelites and He proves it to us. He who said, "*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me (Psalm 50:15)*" still does what He promised. We have hope because God is only a prayer away no matter how badly we have messed up.

Background.

The story of the judges flows out of Deuteronomy. God's work pictured in this book is built on God's promises in Deuteronomy. This book records in some detail the cycle God warned about in Deuteronomy 28. For example, God promised that His people would know His blessing when they obeyed their side of the covenant (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). Within that context God promised, "*And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God*" (Deuteronomy 28:1-2).

There is another side of God's promises in Deuteronomy. In a much larger section of the same chapter, God promised He would chastise His people if they chose to disobey the covenant (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Among other things God warned, "*But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you*" (Deuteronomy 28:15). He also pointed out specifically, "*A nation that you have not known shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labors, and you shall be only oppressed and crushed continually*" (Deuteronomy 28:33).

And so it came to pass in short order. After Joshua's generation died, God's people ignored Him and a painful cycle began. The cycle

looks like this: sin—oppression—repentance—deliverance—sin. This repeated cycle is the story of the book of Judges. The people sinned. God sent enemies to chastise them. When the people cried out to God in repentance because of the attacks of other nations, God brought deliverance through judges.

The stories of twelve judges are written in these pages to a greater or lesser extent. There were eleven men and one woman. Of the twelve, there were six important judges and six less important judges. The first judge, Othniel, served in the first generation after Joshua. In succession after that, over periods of six to forty years, God used these individuals. They were real people who God raised up, equipped, and blessed often in unusual ways to deliver His repentant people from their adversaries.

The judges did not hold offices that they could pass down to their posterity. The position of judge was not hereditary. The only exception even close to this was the son of Gideon who also became a leader of the people, but a bad leader at that. He was not one of God's chosen judges.

The title is not like the noun which refers to a leading individual who interprets and applies the law. These were not leaders who presided over disputes between individuals like those offices God ordained according to Deuteronomy chapters 16, 19, 25. While the word translated “judge” in this book is the same Hebrew word used in Deuteronomy, here the title gives the idea of *a leader who rescues*. The last judge mentioned in the book was Samson who was a contemporary of Samuel whose ministry marked the end of God's work with judges.

The stories in this book took place after Israel was settled in the Promised Land. The history begins with the death of Joshua. Notice that the opening words of the book are “After the death of Joshua” (Judges 1:1). Immediately following that statement we find a brief review of the people's history that leads into their failure.

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the

*servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. **And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel** (Judges 2:6-10).*

The events recorded cover a period of about 350 years. It all began in about the year 1400 BC (probably closer to 1398 BC) after Joshua had led the nation to conquer and settle the land. Putting this in the context of Israel's history, we remember that the exodus was in approximately 1445 BC. Moses led Israel for 40 years in the desert which takes us to about 1405 BC. The conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership took between five and seven years. We know this because Joshua testified that he was forty when Moses sent him to spy out the land (Joshua 14:7). And then at this meeting after Israel had subjugated most of the land Joshua said he was eighty-five (Joshua 14:10).

The period of these judges lasted until the advent of Samuel. Samuel went to live with Eli about the year 1100 BC. He led Israel virtually as the last judge, until around 1050 BC when God gave Israel their first king (Saul). Doing the math leaves us with a period of about 350 years for the judges.

When the author actually wrote the book is for the most part unknown. Some people propose that the unknown author wrote during Judah's exile in Babylon. This idea is based on the statement: “until the day of the captivity of the land” (Judges 18:30). On the surface, this statement seems to refer to the time when both Israel and Judah had been taken away captive. However, other scholars argue that this phrase about the day of captivity is likely a reference to the captivity of the ark of the covenant. The ark was so tied to the nation that when it was taken the people concluded that the glory of God had departed the land. Therefore, Eli's daughter-in-law named her child who was born in the setting of the Philistines capturing the ark, “Ichabod.” She said that the name meant, “The glory has departed from Israel!” because the ark of God had been **captured** (1Samuel

4:21). The word for captured in her statement is the same Hebrew word found in Judges 18:30 translated *captivity*.

Also, arguing for an earlier date of writing is the statement in Judges 1:21. *“But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem, so the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day”* (Judges 1:21). David captured Salem and made it “the city of David” (2 Samuel 5:7). Of course even this verse brings up a question of date because of the word Jerusalem instead of “Salem.”

Themes and Purpose of the Book.

One of the most obvious themes throughout the book is the misery caused by sin. For the Israelites, enemies within their own borders made life miserable. During the years when people sinned, God allowed them to be oppressed by Canaanites from within their own borders. This people group was thoroughly pagan, rejectors of God who God had intended for His people to remove from the land. However, the first chapter of this book lists all the areas where the tribes of Israel allowed the Canaanites to remain thus setting the stage for trouble from within the national boundaries.

Before He sent them to conquer the land, God had warned the people about this precise issue. *“But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell”* (Numbers 33:55). Likewise, after they settled much of the land, Joshua reminded the people before his death that the people failed God and, therefore, He would use these enemies to punish them. *“Know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you”* (Joshua 23:13).

After reading the long list of pagans left in the land (Judges 1:1-36) we read, *Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never*

break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you” (Judges 2:1-3). God, being omniscient and knowing how the people were going to sin against Him, determined that He would use the very people Israel did not remove to chastise them.

God also used enemies from outside Israel to get the people’s attention. God raised up tormentors from the Arameans, Moabites, Midianites, Ammonites, Amalekites, Amorites, Philistines. Always this was consequence of sin with the desire to draw the people to repentance.

A second theme is obvious in the way God was working His purposes for the future through this repeated cycle of failure. This theme of the book is a look forward to a day when Israel would have a king. God had promised the reality of a king for His people before He sent them into the land. He promised, *“When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,’ you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother”* (Deuteronomy 17:14-15). Maybe a king would get the people on the right track and keep them on the right track. Maybe not.

A possible outline of the entire book also reveals three possible themes or lessons God desires for us to learn. The first section might be called the Prologue or Introduction (1:1-3:6). The theme in this section is, “In those days there was no Joshua in the land.” He died. The second section tells about the Twelve Judges (3:7-16:31). The theme here is, “In those days there were judges in the land.” The Epilogue would be the last few chapters of the book (17:1-21:25). Here we find a theme clearly stated four times, “In those days there was no king in the land.”

Thinking about the epilogue section we can conclude that it is possible that the author arranged the contents of this book thematically as opposed to chronologically. Obviously, the information in the prologue (1:1-3:6) is where it should be in time.

Probably the twelve judges stories are pretty much in order. But the events in the Epilogue might not have happened after all the other judges stuff but took place within that same time frame.

For example we read, “*And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land*” (Judges 18:30). Either the Danite story happened early on (in order for Moses’s grandson to act as priest), or this might simply be a statement that while he was alive during the time of the judges period, Jonathan the grandson of Moses acted as priest.

As we close, we need to think about how this book will benefit us. There are many important lessons here for us. We need to remember that the first people to read this account were not the ones who experienced it. The first people who read this account were probably reaping the fruit that these forefathers had sown. God desired for His people to learn the futility of this cycle of sin. Therefore, this is like a sermon preached to God’s people who should be able to learn from the mistakes their predecessors made and learn how the eternal God is immutable or changeless.

One of the important lessons to learn sits right on the surface of the book. It is expressed well by Gideon who asked the important question in a time of crisis and trial. God sent His angel to enlist Gideon as a judge. The angel of the LORD said to him, “*The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.*” Surely we can identify with Gideon’s answer. *And Gideon said to him, “Please, sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian”* (Judges 6:13).

Have you ever wondered why you are in misery if God is for you? Maybe you are like Gideon. Gideon demonstrates how natural it is for us to miss the purpose for which God allows difficulty in our lives. Gideon either ignored or did not connect with the cause for the trouble stated in verse one of the chapter. Leading into the Gideon story we read, *The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven*

years (Judges 6:1). Before we accuse God of not keeping His promises, we need to check on sin in our own lives.

There are more important lessons for us to learn. Such as, “Where does the sin – suffer – repent – restoration – sin cycle ultimately lead?” Before us is the story of about 350 years of failure to truly repent. It expresses the character of the nation as a whole, not individuals, and not even specific generations. The people would appear to repent when trouble came. But in light of the fact that the next generation (or even before that) fell right back into sin, we have to doubt the sincerity or depth of their repentance.

This book shows that the repeated cycle of sin leads to civil discord. For example, Deborah and Barak sing a song in which they criticize Reuben, Dan, Zebulan, and Naphtali for not joining in the battle (5:16-19). Or Gideon’s own countrymen opposed him even when God wanted to use him (7:245-8:17). And then Gideon’s son Abimelech caused a civil war (chapter 9). Jephthah massacred the Ephraimites (12:1-6). The men of Judah handed Samson, the judge from the tribe of Dan, over to the Philistines (15:12). Would they have done that if Samson had been from Judah?

By the time we arrive near the end of the book, we read the incredibly tragic and gross stories about Micah and the Danites and the Levite’s concubine. It is obvious at this point that the whole society was unraveling as eleven tribes nearly annihilated Benjamin.

We know what this result looks like. The American society as a whole is deeply entrenched in sin. In response to serious crisis, there is typically a quasi-repentance across much of the culture. But we have observed how quickly the nation returns to its sin like a dog returns to its vomit. Now we are beginning to experience the kind of inter-societal unrest in which Israel found themselves. In our experience, this unrest is unprecedented except for the War Between the States.

There is also a lesson here for individuals. This book pictures the religious individual who sins, suffers consequences of sin, repents, finds grace, gets settled down, and sins again. Since the nation’s cycle ultimately ended in their complete overthrow by Babylon, what does that portend for the sinner? The insincere penitent, having been warned many times, will one day face eternal judgment.

Now we close by looking at the larger lesson. The book opens by stating the problem: “The people did not obey God by completely conquering the land.” The book ends with two particularly grievous examples of the depth of degradation to which the sin, suffer, repent, restore, sin cycle led. The original failure to obey led to the gross sins in the end. In between are twelve examples of how the judges were unable to bring lasting obedience to God and, therefore, lasting peace.

All of this is the pathway leading to the need for a king. Remember that the phrase “there was no king” is key in this book (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). That statement leads to the next step in God’s plan. Note how God was progressively teaching the nation. First, God created the nation of Israel and gave them priests who would lead them in obedience to God by applying the laws of sacrifices. That system didn’t work to keep the people in fellowship with God. Second, God gave the people the land He promised, along with judges who periodically led them through wars to temporary peace. But the people still could not maintain fellowship with God. Third, God gave His people kings. Not only did they not lead the people to fellowship with God, but they typically led them in rebellion against God.

In the last generations under the kings’ leadership, God sent His people prophets who declared God’s warnings and promised blessings. The people did not listen and did not walk in fellowship with God. Therefore, true to His word and keeping His promise, God put His people back into bondage, this time to the Babylonians. They repented slightly but could not maintain fellowship with God.

Is it a hopeless case? Not at all. This is all part of God’s plan. When God had proven that there is no salvation in any other name under heaven, He sent His Son! Of course we know that the posterity of the ancient Israelites, acting just like their forefathers, also rejected God the Son.

How does the larger lesson apply to all of us? Because of our nature, we cannot help but sin. God has provided the means for us to defeat sin and walk in fellowship with Him. But we, like the ancient Israelites who failed to keep God’s covenant when they failed to remember the Lord’s acts of salvation and deliverance in the past, also forget God’s salvation for us. Therefore, God has provided the ultimate deliverance for us through Jesus Christ. We must trust Him

to be forgiven. We must trust Him daily to live in fellowship with Him.

Therefore, the message of the book is, “In spite of human failure, and even through the failure of His chosen people, God will be faithful to His promises.”