



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 1:1-2:5

To understand the themes and structure of the book of Judges.

The Ugly Truth

I have known so many Christians that take issue with various movies or television shows because of the immoral behavior, violence, language, or overt sexuality in them. And while I agree that protecting our minds from worldly influence is important, whenever people make a big deal about the grotesque offerings in pop culture, I always also think to myself, “*But have you ever read the book of Judges?*” There is no show or movie that illustrates *more* violence or sinful behavior than this book of the Bible. Between conquest, violent deaths, rape, sexual immorality, and civil war, Judges highlights the ugly truth about the people of God; *they are still people*. Israel enters into this story as the chosen people of Yahweh, and they exit this story having proved that they are no more morally righteous than any other people group.

As difficult as some of the stories may be (and they *are* difficult), it’s one of the reasons I believe Judges is such an important offering in Bible study for the modern church. This book should cause us to take pause and consider who we believe God can use to accomplish His purposes, and who is disqualified. While the New Testament sets qualifications for pastors and elders that are important and binding (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), we should not expect God to only use people in those categories to be a catalyst for change or a vessel to execute His will. God is in the business of empowering people to accomplish His purpose, and as it turns out, it’s a really, really messy business. There is no book that illustrates this with more clarity than Judges. This study will challenge you. It will challenge you academically, for one. It is filled with names of people and places that are uncommon and sometimes hard to pronounce. It will challenge you emotionally, as well. There

are stories that will make you uncomfortable, and rightfully so. More than anything, it will challenge you spiritually, because you will be forced to reckon with the fact that if God can use these people, he can probably use anyone, and that includes all of the people you don't think should be included.

More than anything, Judges is a beautiful book because it demonstrates how pitiful we are without a God protecting and leading us, and also how remarkably powerful God actually is. There are no close victories when it comes to Yahweh. When He decides to act, He does so with no resistance; no one stands in His way. Buckle up, take a deep breath, and get ready; Judges is a bumpy ride, but with an excellent payoff.

Who Wrote It?

As is the case with many books of the Old Testament, the author is unknown. We don't know who wrote Judges, but we do have some ideas about *when* it was written. The narrative of Judges takes place in the period between Joshua's conquest and the Israeli monarchy beginning in 1 Samuel under King Saul. However, the book itself was not written in the period that it chronicles, but was penned during the monarchy. Several passages indicate this, but none better than Judges 17:6: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." It makes no sense for the author to speak of a time in the past as one where no king existed if no king had ever existed. The natural implication is that a king *does* exist now, but didn't then.

A Devolving System

One important note to make is that the Judges represent the people of Israel as a whole. As the story of Judges progresses, the people of Israel fall into greater moral decline. Predictably, the Judges decline in character and stature as well.

OTHNIEL (3:7-11)

Othniel is the ideal judge. He is raised up by God, given His Spirit, and leads well. His ascent is predicted in Judges 1:13. He is from the tribe of Judah.

EHUD (3:12-20)

Ehud is not raised up by God, nor does he have the Spirit of God. He delivers Israel through deceitful tactics, and Judges is silent about Yahweh's relationship to him, which is not a good thing.

DEBORAH (4:1-5:31)

Deborah is, herself, not a bad Judge. She uses wisdom and is a prophetess capable of rightly predicting future events. However, she is a female Judge in a patriarchal society. Her rise into the role of Judge is more of an indictment against Israel for not being able to raise up Godly male leadership.

GIDEON (6:1-9:56)

Gideon is, in spite of being a Judge, nearly incapable of trusting God. He requires multiple signs from God in order to do anything.

ABIMELEK (8:33-35)

Abimelek's story arc is interesting because he is not actually a Judge, and yet his narrative takes up sizable space in the book of Judges. He is the illegitimate son of Gideon and a concubine.

JEPHTHAH (10:6-12:6)

Jephthah's ascension to Judge raises questions about Israel's relationship to Canaan. Gilead fathered Jephthah through a prostitute (Jdg. 11:1), but also fathered other kids through his wife (Jdg. 11:2). If the prostitute was an Israelite woman, it violates Leviticus 19:29. On the other hand, if she was a Canaanite, it violates Exodus 34:15-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-5. Either way, Jephthah's prevalence raises questions about Israel's relationship to Canaanite practices.

SAMSON (13-16:30)

Samson is morally vacant, has little regard for the very serious Nazirite vow he has taken (Num. 6:2-21), and is the quintessential example of hedonism. Samson is the perfect final Judge because his lack of character shows how far Israel has fallen since Othniel first rose to prominence.

A Structured Pattern

Judges 1:1 through 3:6 serve as the opening introduction the book, but can be separated into two parts. This week's study will only focus on 1:1 through 2:5, and next week we will examine 2:6 through 3:6. Judges 1:1-2:5 serves as a prelude to the events in this book. Judges is all about the apostasy of God's people, their subsequent judgment, and the Judges raised up when the people of God repent. Thus, Judges 1:1-2:5 demonstrates how each of the tribes end up in each of their respective territories. This sets the stage for the events of the actual book, which are summarized in 2:6 through 3:6. There are some interesting patterns in this opening passage that are worth mentioning.

THE ORDER OF TRIBES TO JUDGES

In Judges 1:1-2:5, the list of tribes is intentional to the structure of the book. The first tribe mentioned in 1:2-15 is Judah. The first Judge mentioned, Othniel, is correspondingly a Judahite. The final tribe mentioned in 1:34 is Dan, and the final Judge mentioned is Samson, a Danite. The list moves from southern tribes to northern tribes (keep in mind, this is before the southern and northern kingdom split), and thus the Judges move from southern tribal heritage to northern tribal heritage as well. This also foreshadows the moral decay that takes place with greater effect in the later northern kingdom as well.

THE KENITE NARRATIVE

Couched in the list of tribes is a narrative about the, "descendants of the Kenite" (Jdg. 1:16). This seems weirdly out of place, but it sets up an important part of the Deborah narrative in chapter 4, where Jael, a Kenite, kills a Canaanite commander.

ADDITIONAL MINI-NARRATIVES

Beyond that, there are other smaller themes in chapter 1 that are connected to the bigger picture. In 1:4-7, the story of Adoni-bezek sets up the negative portrayal of other Canaanite kings (Cushan-rishathaim, Eglon). In 1:11-15, the story of Achsah shows a woman who exercises power over a man, which foreshadows Deborah and Jael, and the woman who kills Abimelech. Finally, 1:22-26 presents a picture of the usage of deception, which we find in Jael's murder of Sisera and the conquest of Gibeah.

Understanding the role of a chapter is crucial in making sense of it. When one reads Judges 1:1 through 2:5, it seems random. However, when we understand that it is a prelude to the story Judges presents to us, and that it includes stories that act as themes for the larger narrative, it makes a lot of sense. Next week, we will examine 2:6 through 3:6 in order to understand how it also sets the stage for the real bulk of the story beginning in Judges 3:7.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 1:1-7. Who is the hero of this passage, and who is the enemy? Who went with Judah to fight?

2. Read Judges 1:8-10. Where else did Judah go to fight? Who did the sons of Judah conquer?

Day Two

1. Read Judges 1:11-15. What was Debir formerly called? Who was Caleb going to give as a reward for capturing Kiriath-sepher? Who captured it? What did Achsah ask him to do?

2. Read Judges 1:16-21. Which descendants are mentioned next? Who did Judah and Simeon attack next? Why could they not drive out the inhabitants of the valley? Who did not drive out the Jebusites from Jerusalem?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 1:22-26. Which tribe attacked Bethel? In your own words, describe how they strategized this attack?

2. Read Judges 1:27-29. Which lands did the tribe of Manasseh not take possession of? Who persisted in that land as a result? What did Israel do with these individuals?

Day Four

1. Read Judges 1:30-35. Write down the tribes listed and the lands they did not take full possession of in these verses. Why do you think these details are recorded? What is problematic about this?

2. Read Judges 2:1-5. What major events does the angel of the LORD recall in this passage? How does verse 3 answer the above question? What did they name the place where the angel of the LORD spoke to them, and what did they do there?
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Week 1 Discussion: Disobedience Leads to Disobedience

In Judges 1:1-2:5, we are given a detailed account of some of the military moves that the tribes of Israel made, and crucially some of the lands they did not take full possession of, which resulted in the Canaanites and Amorites staying among them. This was an act of disobedience. God told them to fully remove them from the land in Exodus 34:11-15 and Joshua reinforced this as well as the consequences for disobeying such a command in Joshua 23:13. Disobeying God eventually led to more disobedience because the persistence of the Canaanite people led to intermingling, intermarriage, and ultimately idolatry. Talk as a group about how small acts of disobedience have led to larger acts of disobedience, and how you can be more careful to do the little things right to avoid the big problems.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever experienced a small sin pave the way for a really big sin? If you are willing, share with the group what happened.
2. Is any act of obedience too small to matter? Why or why not?
3. How can inviting accountability into your life help you make the right little choices more consistently?
4. Who holds you accountable? If no one holds you accountable, what is stopping you from inviting accountability into your life?
5. Why does accountability seem so scary?
6. How can the church foster greater accountability in every day Christian living?

Takeaways:

1. Judges shows the moral deterioration of God's people, and reveals that apart from the presence of God, the people of God are no different than anyone else.
2. The opening chapter of Judges serves as a prelude to the primary story that Judges presents.

PRAYER REQUESTS: