

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 2:6-3:6**

To understand the big picture of Judges.

An Excellent Introduction

I have for a long time now been fascinated by what makes specific literary works stand out as exceptional. I recently began reading books tailored towards literary structure, and what makes great writing so great. There are a lot of variables, and certainly each individual author has specific qualities that are unique to their work, but one thing that almost every great work possesses is a well-constructed introduction. Introductions are often skipped over, and always to the reader's demise. The introduction not only sets the tone for the rest of the work, but it should inform the reader what to expect in the remaining chapters. The introduction in some ways could be understood as a blueprint for the whole work. The author is able to give small snapshots of each of the chapters, so that when the reader comes to the chapter, they have some idea of what to expect in it. The introduction helps orient the reader in such a way that they are most able to understand the material being presented in each individual chapter. Many great works do this; Judges is one of them.

Judges 2:6 through 3:6 is a blueprint for the entire story. It gives just enough detail to walk through the events from a bird's eye view, such that when the reader embarks on the actual journey of reading and studying Judges, they know what to expect and are better equipped to understand what is happening. This week, we will look at Judges 2:6 through 3:6 with that in mind in an effort to better understand each of these stories when we get to them.

The End of Joshua's Story

Verse 6 begins with, "When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land." The whole goal of conquest in the book of Joshua was to take hold of the land that God had promised His people. The land of Canaan was vast, and so the tribes of Israel all took possession of different portions of it (see map below). This geographical dispersion sets the stage for how many of the events in Judges will play out.

Joshua's tenure was all in all, successful. Verse 7 says, "The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel." The legacy that he leaves behind is one of that is mostly successful with one exception, and it's a big one: "All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, *nor yet the work which He had done for Israel.*" The people were obedient prior to Joshua's death, but the command to tell their children (Deut. 11:19) was missed, and the result of that was a new generation who was not aware of the works of the LORD, nor the law revealed to Moses in the Torah, and these two realities become a massive problem for God's people throughout the Judges narrative.

It's worth noting additionally, that these verses in Judges 2:6-10 are almost certainly taken right out of Joshua 24:28-31. This sets the stage of Judges as not only an important story in the history of Israel, but a *continuation* of the Joshua narrative as well as the Torah.



Idolatry Is Always a Problem

The result of the aforementioned failure to teach generational obedience is expanded upon in verses 11 through 13: "Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger. So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth." There are several important terms and factors in this passage. Below is a brief outline of the passage.

BAAL

The primary false god of the Canaanites in the Old Testament is undoubtedly Baal. While not the most powerful god in the Canaanite pantheon (that distinction is given to El), Baal is the most prominent in Old Testament interaction. Baal is the god of the sun and rain and played a major role in the social aspect of Canaanite culture. The Canaanites depended heavily upon sunshine and rain for agricultural success. He is also known in Babylonian as Belu or Bel, meaning Lord (often referenced with Merodach). In Canaanite culture, his full name was Baal-Shemaim, which means something like, "lord of heaven." This is an important detail to consider because the name *Baal* shows up in a lot of places, and it doesn't always seem bad. Baal is

simply a *title* meaning *lord*, and not a name. This explains why both Jonathan and David had sons called Merib-baal (1 Ch. 8:31; 9:40). It wasn't until Ahab and Jezebel that the title became associated with the worship of the false god. By the time we get to Hosea, the prophet declares: "'It will come about in that day,' declares the LORD, 'That you will call Me Ishi and will no longer call Me Baali.'" The cultic worship of the false god is the issue at hand in the book of Judges. It demonstrates one of two major problems that develop in Israel which will be covered in a moment.

ASHTAROTH

Ashtaroth is the Canaanite goddess of fertility, love, and war, and the daughter of *El* and *Asherah*. In Canaanite mythology, she appears to be the sister of the goddess *Anath*, and the spouse of the god *Baal*. In Egypt she is known as *Astarte* (the "lady of heaven"). The Babylonians and the Assyrians refer to as *Ashtar*, and also worshipped her as the goddess of fertility and love. The people of these regions during the Greco-Roman era knew her as *Venus* or *Aphrodite*. Usually, when Ashtaroth is mentioned in the Old Testament, is connected to the cultic pagan worship of Baal as well, being that Baal and Ashtaroth are married in the Canaanite pantheon.

COVENANT BREAKING

The main problem described in these verses is two-fold, and they are a direct violation of both the Deuteronomic commandments (Deut. 7:1-5), as well as the commandments that Joshua gives (Josh. 23:6-7). The people of Israel were clearly told to never worship or bow down to a false god (Ex. 20:3-6), and also not to intermarry with the foreign people groups because it would certainly lead to idolatry as well. Judges begins by telling us that these two specific commandments were ignored, and thus the problems that Israel will face in this narrative are a result of this disobedience.

A Recognizable Pattern

Judges presents a pattern that we have seen before in the Old Testament prior to this book. In the wilderness, the people of God go through a pattern that goes like: 1. Israel is blessed by God, 2. Israel falls into sin, 3. God calls Israel to repentance, 4. No repentance? God judges Israel!, 5. Israel repents because of the judgment of God, 6. Israel is blessed by God. This same pattern emerges again in Judges, but this time, God raises up a Judge to save Israel after they repent.

Judges 2:16-19 says it this way: "Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. 17 Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers. 18 When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them. 19 But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways." Again, remember that chapter 2 is setting up the big picture. These verses really highlight what we should expect in this chapter in general.

The Other Nations

As a result, God decides to remove His hand of protection on Israel that protected them when Joshua was alive, and allow the surrounding nations to become a threat once more (Jdg. 2:21). The remaining nations are:

“The Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Jdg. 3:5). These are the people groups that will pose a threat to Israel, but not necessarily because of war. Verse 6 tells us: “And they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.”

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 2:6-10. What did the sons of Israel do when Joshua dismissed the people? Where did they go? What did the people do when Joshua was alive? What happened after he died? What was significant about the new generation that came after Joshua's death?

2. Read Judges 2:11-13. What did the sons of Israel do in the sight of the LORD? Who did they serve? According to the above notes, who is Baal, and who is Ashtaroah?

Day Two

1. Read Judges 2:14-15. What was the result of Israel's disobedience and idolatry? What did God cause for them?

2. Read Judges 2:16-19. Who did the LORD raise up? Did Israel listen to these people? What did they do instead? Why did the LORD eventually deliver Israel each time?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 2:20-23. Why was the LORD angry with Israel? What did the LORD decide *not* to do as a punishment for their disobedience?

2. Read Judges 3:1-2. Why did the LORD allow some nations to remain in the land?

Day Four

1. Read Judges 3:3-4. What nations are referenced in these verses?

2. Read Judges 3:5-6. What nations are referenced in these verses?
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Week 2 Discussion: Breaking a Cycle

One noticeable pattern in the book of Judges is the cycle of blessing, sin, lack of repentance, judgment, repentance, and more blessing. It's a cycle that continues not only in this book, but in much of the Old Testament. If we are honest, there are cycles of sin, discipline, repentance, and blessing in our own lives as well. Talk as a group about how you can better recognize these cycles and what is necessary to break free from them.

1. Icebreaker: Are there are cycles of sin and repentance in your life that you can think of? In other words, is there some sin in your life that you continuously return to after having repented of it?
2. Has it been your experience that sin works in cycles in your life?
3. If there is a cycle of sin in your life but you aren't aware of it, how do you become aware of it? What steps should you take?
4. Do you think it's possible that you are in a cycle of sin that you cannot see but that someone else in your life could see? How important are relationships to discovering these cycles?
5. What are practical ways you can ensure you don't return to a sin you have repented of?
6. Can the church be a more effective place for people to work through these sin cycles? Why or why not?

Takeaways:

1. The people of Israel began to serve Baal and Ashtaroth after the death of Joshua.
2. God raised up Judges to judge Israel in their sin and ultimately deliver them when they cried out for mercy.
3. The cycle of sin, judgment, and repentance is a repeating theme throughout Judges.

PRAYER REQUESTS: