

# Judges

## *A Suggested Outline of Judges*

- I. Apathy (1–2)
  - A. Early victories (1:1–26)
  - B. Repeated defeats (1:27–36)
  - C. Divine rebuke (2:1–5)
  - D. Serving other gods (2:6–23)  
(summary of the entire book).
  
- II. Apostasy (3–16)
  - A. Othniel (3:1–11)  
(Mesopotamia).
  - B. Ehud and Shamgar (3:12–31)  
(Moab).
  - C. Deborah and Barak (4–5)  
(The Canaanites).
  - D. Gideon (6–8)  
(Midian).
  - E. Abimelech, Tola, and Jair (9:1–10:5)  
(Men of Shechem).
  - F. Jephthah (10:6–12:15)  
(Ammon).
  - G. Samson (13–16)  
(The Philistines).
  
- III. Anarchy (17–21)
  - A. Idolatry (17–18)
  - B. Immorality (19)
  - C. Civil war (20–21)

## *Introductory Notes to Judges*

### **I. Theme**

Just as Joshua continues the history of Israel after the death of Moses (Josh. 1:1), the Book of Judges picks up the story of Israel after the death of Joshua (Jud. 1:1). This is a book of defeat and disgrace, as we see in the key verse (17:6): "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The Lord was no longer "King in Israel"—the tribes were divided; the people were mixing with the heathen nations; and it was necessary for God to chasten His people. We have a summary of the entire book in 2:10–19—blessing, disobedience, chastening, repentance, deliverance. Judges is the book of incomplete victory; it is a book of failure on the part of God's people to trust His Word and claim His power.

### **II. Spiritual Lesson**

You will recall the three divisions of Joshua: crossing the river, conquering the enemy, and claiming the inheritance. Joshua records how Israel crossed the river and began to conquer the enemy, but the book ends with "much land yet to be possessed" (Josh. 13:1 and 23:1–11). "Crossing the river" signifies death to self and separation from sin; it means entering into our spiritual inheritance by faith (Eph. 1:3). But after we have taken this step of faith, it is easy to faint, or to compromise with the enemy. Israel entered into her land, but she failed to possess the total inheritance. She first tolerated the enemy, then took tribute (taxes) from the enemy, then mixed with the enemy, and finally surrendered to the enemy. It was only through God's deliverers (the judges) that the Israelites found victory. How easy it is for Christians to "settle down with sin" and miss the blessings of complete dedication and complete victory.

### **III. The Land**

The Promised Land was filled with many nations and many "petty kings" who ruled over smaller territories. Joshua had led the nation collectively in great victories over the major enemies; the way had now been paved for each tribe to go in by faith and claim the allotted inheritance. Whereas the Book of Joshua is a record of united efforts, Judges records a divided nation no longer devoted to the Lord, forgetful of the covenant that they made at Sinai.

### **IV. The Judges**

Named in this book are twelve different judges raised up by God to defeat a particular enemy in a particular territory and give the people rest. These judges were not national leaders; rather, they were local leaders who delivered the people from various oppressors. It is possible that some of the periods of oppression and rest overlap. Not all of the tribes participated in each battle, and often there was tribal rivalry. That God could call these "ordinary people" as judges and use them so mightily is another evidence of His grace and power (1 Cor. 1:26–31). The Spirit of God came upon these

leaders for a particular work (6:34; 11:29; 13:25), though often their personal lives were not exemplary in every detail. The several hundred years of rule under the judges prepared Israel for their request for a king (1 Sam. 8).

## V. The Nations That Remained

God permitted the heathen nations to be left in the land for several reasons: (1) to punish Israel, 2:3, 20–21; (2) to prove Israel, 2:22 and 3:4; (3) to provide Israel with experience in warfare, 3:2; and (4) to prevent the land from becoming a wilderness, Deut. 7:20–24. If Israel wanted to live with this “second-class” situation, God would give them their desire. He then used these nations for His own purposes. The Jews could have enjoyed total victory; instead, they settled for a compromise. Chapters 3–16 picture the “up-and-down” experiences of some of God’s people. Alas, the nation did not yield to God and obey Him; they looked instead to the human helpers He sent them. Too many Christians have their “ups and downs” and run to the pastor or another friend for help instead of first getting alone with God to permit Him to examine their hearts and give them the help they need.

# Judges 1–5

## I. The Failures of the Nation (1–2)

### A. *They failed to conquer the land (1:1–36).*

Verses 1–18 record the early victories of Judah and Simeon, while the rest of the chapter is a record of repeated defeats. These two tribes were able to take Bezek (v. 4), Jerusalem (v. 8), Hebron (v. 10), Debir (v. 11), Zephath (v. 17), Gaza, Askelon, and Ekron (v. 18). The people of Joseph took Bethel (v. 22), but the rest of the tribes were unable to drive out the enemy. What began as a series of victories, led by the Lord, ended as a series of compromises. Judah could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley (v. 19, and see 4:13ff); Benjamin could not overcome the Jebusites (v. 21); and the other tribes likewise “settled down” with the heathen nations (vv. 27–36). Of course, they were able to rationalize their failures by making slaves out of the heathen peoples; but this only led to further trouble. In Joshua 23–24, Joshua had warned them against compromising with the enemy, but now they were falling into that very trap.

### B. *They failed to consider the Law (2:1–10).*

This, of course, was the reason for their repeated failures and de-feats. God had promised Joshua constant victory if the nation honored and obeyed the Word (Josh. 1:7–8), and Joshua had repeated this promise to the leaders (Josh. 23:5–11). Gilgal had been the scene of great victory for Israel, but now the Lord moved from Gilgal to Bochim, “the place of weeping,” emphasizing Israel’s tragic decline from winning to

weeping! (For the importance of Gilgal, see Josh. 5:1–9; 9:6; 10:6. Gilgal was the center of Israel's military operations, the camp of Joshua. Now it had been forsaken.)

God reminded the people that they had disobeyed the Law by making covenants with the heathen nations and joining themselves to their gods. Read Deut. 7 carefully for God's instructions on this matter of separation. The nation had followed the Law during the years of Joshua and the leaders that followed him, but after they died, the nation backslid. "There arose another generation ... which knew not the Lord." (See v. 10). They had not even brought their own children to the Lord! They had failed to teach them the Law, as God had instructed them to do in Deut. 6:1–15. How often this happens in nations, churches, and families. How easy it is for the "younger generation" to fall away from the Lord if the "older generation" is not faithful to teach them and set the best example of obedience before them.

### *C. They failed to cleave to the Lord (2:11–23).*

They forsook the Lord and they followed other gods. The religion of the Canaanites was horribly wicked, with practices too obscene to discuss. Worship of Baal and Ashtaroth (male and female deities, v. 13) plagued Israel throughout their history. Once it got into their lives, it was difficult to exterminate. When the people forsook the Lord, He forsook them. Time after time he "sold them" into the hands of their enemies. Instead of enjoying the "rest" God had promised, the nation was in and out of slavery for hundreds of years, with only occasional periods of "rest" from the Lord. Each time the judgment became so severe that the nation finally cried out to God. He would send a deliverer, but note that God was with the judge personally, not with the nation collectively. Sadly enough, the people turned to the Lord only when in trouble; once the judge was gone, the nation fell back into sin again.

These failures are seen in professing Christians today. At times, instead of overcoming the enemy, we compromise and let the enemy drag us down. We often deliberately disobey the Word of God, and many times we fail to love the Lord and cleave to Him by faith. When this happens, God must chasten us, and the only remedy is for us to repent and return.

## **II. The Victories of the Judges (3–5)**

In the Book of Joshua, there was one leader and God was with the whole nation; but in Judges, there are many leaders, and God is with these leaders only, not with the entire nation (2:18). Several minor judges are listed here whose ministries we can only study briefly.

### *A. Othniel (3:1–11).*

The people of Mesopotamia enslaved Israel for eight years; then God raised up Caleb's son-in-law Othniel to deliver the nation. His name means "God is might," and he lived up to his name. See Jud. 1:9–15 and Josh. 15:16–19. It must have pleased the family of Caleb to have such a courageous man in their ranks. He delivered the nation and they had rest for forty years.

*B. Ehud (3:12–30).*

This time the Lord used Moab to chasten Israel, along with Ammon and Amalek, the old enemies of the Jews! The Israelites served as slaves for eighteen years until Ehud delivered them and gave them rest for eighty years. God used the fact that he was left-handed to deceive the enemy, for the king would not have known what Ehud would be drawing out from his garments on the right side (3:21). The Benjamites seemed to be gifted with left-handed men (Jud. 20:16; 1 Chron. 12:2). Once the enemy king was slain, Ehud was able to muster his army and drive out the invaders.

*C. Shamgar (3:31).*

It is probable that Shamgar led in a local victory against the Philistines. He is not called a judge, although he is listed with them. God is able to use the most foolish weapons, even an ox goad.

*D. Deborah and Barak (chaps. 4–5).*

The nation had fallen so low that it was now judged by a woman, which would humiliate the men in this male-dominant society (see Isa. 3:12). For twenty years the Canaanites had oppressed Israel, so God raised up this prophetess to lead the way to victory. First she called Barak to deliver the nation (4:1–7), and she even gave him the battle plan from the Lord. Usually the Kishon River was dry, but God was going to send a great storm that would flood the river-bed and trap the chariots of iron (see 4:3 and 5:20–22). Though Barak is listed as a man of faith in Heb. 11:32, we see him here as a man who had to depend upon Deborah for victory. In fact, God used two women to deliver the Jews—Deborah the prophetess and Jael (vv. 18–24). It is interesting to contrast Barak and Samson. Both were associated with women, but in one case this led to victory, while in the other it led to defeat. Barak led 10,000 men from Mt. Tabor, trusting the promise of God given by His servant, Deborah. Whatever may have been Barak's weaknesses, God still honored him for his faith. In her song of victory (chap. 5), Deborah praises the Lord for the willingness of the people to fight in the battle (vv. 2, 9). However, she also names some of the tribes that were too cowardly to fight (5:16–17). The battle was held "by the waters of Megiddo" where the Kishon River flowed down from Mt. Tabor. Sisera and his army thought their chariots of iron would give them victory, but it was the chariots that led to their defeat! God sent a great storm (5:4–5 and 20–22) that turned the plain into a swamp, and the enemy could not attack. Israel won a great victory that day, led by Barak, planned by Deborah.

But it was not given to Barak to slay General Sisera; this was left to another woman, Jael. The Kenites were a people friendly to Israel (Jud. 1:16) because of their connection with Moses' family (Jud. 4:11), but they were also friendly to Jabin, the Canaanite king. Usually a man in the cultures of the East will not enter a woman's tent, but Jael persuaded Jabin, made him comfortable, and then killed him. The "nail" was likely a wooden tent peg. Her deed is praised in Deborah's song (5:24–27), although some people find it difficult to understand this deed. Certainly Sisera would have been slain when Barak's troops caught up with him, and he was the enemy of the Lord (5:31),

not of Jael personally. She was helping Israel fight the battles of the Lord. Two women rejoiced in victory (Deborah and Jael), but one woman (the mother of Sisera) wept in sorrow (5:28–30).

Note in 5:6–8 a description of the terrible state of society in Israel at that time. The people were so fearful they moved from the villages into the walled cities, and it was not safe for people to travel on the highways. A decline in the social and moral life of the nation was the inevitable consequence of the nation's spiritual decline.

## Judges 6–8

Hebrews 11:32 puts Gideon at the head of the list of judges. Though he sometimes wavered in his faith, he was still a “man of faith” who dared to trust the Word of God. When we realize that he was a farmer, not a trained warrior, we see how wonderful his faith was! We will trace Gideon's career in this passage.

### I. Gideon the Coward (6:1–24)

Seven years of bondage under the Midianites had brought Israel to its lowest level. Instead of “riding on the high places” (Deut. 32:13), they were hiding in the dens! The Israelites were not even allowed to harvest their grain, which explains why we find Gideon hiding in the winepress. God's prophet (vv. 7–10) reminded the people of their unbelief and sin; then God's Angel—Christ Himself—visited Gideon to prepare him for his victory. Remember that God had forsaken His people temporarily; He was now working through chosen individuals (2:18).

When the Angel called Gideon a “mighty man of valor” (v. 12), it seemed a mockery, yet God was only anticipating what Gideon would become by faith. It reminds us of Christ's words to Peter: “You are ... You shall be” (John 1:42, nkjv). But see Gideon's unbelief, which was the cause of his cowardice, as he questions God: “If ... why ... where ... how ... if ...?” Then he asks God to show him a sign! This is certainly not the language of faith. Gideon confessed that God had chastened His people justly (v. 13), but he could not understand how the Lord would use a poor farmer like himself to deliver the nation. God met his unbelief with a series of promises: “The Lord is with you”; “you shall save Israel ... have I not sent you?” “surely I will be with you” (vv. 12, 14, nkjv). Faith comes by hearing God's Word (Rom. 10:17). Gideon required a sign, and God graciously granted it to him (vv. 19–24). However, this is not a good example for us to follow. “Jehovah-shalom” means “The Lord is our peace” (vv. 23–24).

### II. Gideon the Challenger (6:25–32)

It is one thing to meet God in the secrecy of a winepress, but quite another thing to stand up for the Lord in public. That very night God tested Gideon's dedication by asking him to tear down his father's idolatrous altar to Baal, and to build an altar to Jehovah. More than this, he was to sacrifice his father's special bullock (probably

reserved for Baal) on the new altar. Christian testimony has to begin at home. Gideon obeyed the Lord, but he showed unbelief by doing the deed by night (v. 27) and by asking ten other men to help him. We can imagine the furor in the neighborhood when the people discovered the destroyed altar the next morning! Did they kill Gideon? No! Rather, Gideon became a leader, able to summon the army together to prepare to fight. God will never use a "secret saint" to win great battles. We must come out in the open and take our stand, regardless of the cost.

### **III. Gideon the Conqueror (6:33–8:3)**

#### *A. He conquered his fears (6:33–7:14).*

An army of thirty-two thousand men rallied to his side, but he was still doubtful of victory. How gracious God is to minister to His feeble saints! Gideon "put out the fleece" twice, and both times God answered. It is too bad, though, when God's people trust circumstances to lead them instead of relying on God's clear Word. Gideon was not the only one afraid; 22,000 soldiers were also fearful and went home (7:1–3, and see Deut. 20:8). However, God did not need all of the remaining 10,000 men, so He tested them and sent most of them home. The 300 who drank from the hand (v. 6) would have been in better position to face and fight the enemy in a surprise attack.

On the night of the battle, God saw that there was still fear in Gideon's heart (vv. 9–14), so He graciously gave him a special sign assuring him that he would win the battle. The barley cake represented Gideon, for barley was the poorest kind of food. But God was going to use this ordinary farmer to win a great victory!

#### *B. He conquered his foes (7:15–25).*

Note how Gideon quotes God's promise of victory to the people (v. 15, note v. 9). He was relying wholly on the Word of God. This victory was won by the power of God, for their weapons were useless in the battle. The Spirit of God was now using Gideon (6:34); see Zech. 4:6 and 1 Cor. 1:26–31. The pitchers would hide the light of the torches and would also make a great deal of noise when broken; and these effects, added to the shouting and the blowing of the trumpets, would certainly rout the enemy. The vessel, torch, and trumpet also have spiritual significance. We must be clean, yielded vessels for God to use (2 Tim. 2:21); we must let our lights shine (Matt. 5:16); and we must "trumpet out" a clear witness for Christ (1 Thes. 1:8).

The steps in Gideon's victory are easy to trace: he has a promise to believe (6:12, 14, 16; 7:7–9), an altar to build (6:25–26), a vessel to break, a lamp to burn, and a trumpet to blow. And God gave the victory!

#### *C. He conquered his feelings (8:1–3).*

Ephraim had not been included in the original army (6:35), but Manasseh, the sister tribe, had shared in the battle. Later, Gideon called Ephraim to capture the two famous princes, which they did. But they were provoked! How easy it is for the flesh to act even when God has given a great victory. Gideon could have "told them off" but instead he

practiced Prov. 15:1: "A soft answer turns away wrath" (nkjv). It is better to control our feelings than to conquer a city (Prov. 16:32); and if Gideon had offended his brethren, he might never win them back (Prov. 18:19). Godly leaders must know how to control their own feelings.

#### **IV. Gideon the Compromiser (8:4–35)**

Gideon and his 300 men pursued the two kings of Midian, but the men of Succoth and Penuel would not assist him. Their attitude provoked Gideon and he promised to avenge himself. This seems to have been the beginning of his backsliding, for God certainly would have dealt with these rebellious men in His own way (Rom. 12:19). The army took the host of Midian by surprise when the kings were feeling confident (8:11), and on his return march, Gideon punished the men of Succoth and Penuel with thorns and briers (8:16–17). He then slew the two kings who had themselves slain Gideon's brethren.

After winning a great victory, we must always beware of the temptation to sin, for Satan attacks us subtly when we least expect it. The nation asked Gideon to become their king and to establish a dynasty; but this he refused. "The Lord shall rule over you!" However, Gideon used this opportunity to ask for "a lesser thing"—all their earrings and ornaments. This seemed like a fitting gift for a great deliverer, but keep in mind that these golden trinkets were associated with idol worship. Ornaments in v. 21 is actually "crescents"; these items were connected with moon-worship. Read Gen. 35:1–4 for the association between earrings and idolatry.

Gideon made an idolatrous "ephod" (or image) with the seventy pounds of gold he collected. What the Midianites could not do by means of swords, Satan accomplished with earrings. It is sad to see the man who overthrew Baal's altar now setting up an idol of his own. Unfortunately, the whole nation forsook God and worshiped the new god (v. 27). When Gideon died, the nation went right back to Baal worship (v. 33).

The subsequent history of Gideon's family is not encouraging. He had many sons and daughters by his "many wives" (v. 30), but these were all slain (with the exception of Jotham) by the son of Gideon's concubine, a man named Abimelech (v. 31; Jud. 9:1–6). Furthermore, before Gideon's family was slain, they were not treated kindly by the nation (v. 35). How soon the sinful hearts of humans forget both the Lord (v. 34) and the people who have served them faithfully.

## **Judges 13–16**

Few accounts in the Bible are as tragic as this one. Here is a man to whom God gave twenty years' time to begin to overcome the enemy, yet in the end, he himself was overcome by the enemy. Samson's history is an illustration of Paul's warning in 1 Cor. 9:27, for Samson was a castaway. Hebrews 11:32 cites him for his faith in God's Word, but apart from this, very little can be said on his behalf. "Let him who thinks he stands



take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12, nkjv). Note the steps that led to Samson's sin and tragic end.

### **I. He Despised His Heritage (13)**

Samson was born into a godly home, to parents who believed in prayer. He was God's special gift to them and to the nation. He had a father who prayed, "Teach us what we shall do unto the child" (v. 8; and see v. 12). His parents had a fear of God and tried to instill this same fear in their son. They brought offerings to God and dared to believe His wonderful promises.

God gave to Samson a special endowment of the Holy Spirit that made him a conqueror. God called Samson to be a Nazarite ("separated one"), wholly surrendered to the Lord. According to Num. 6, a Nazarite was never to drink strong drink or touch a dead body; and the mark of his dedication would be his uncut hair.

All of this wonderful heritage the grown Samson despised! Instead of putting himself in God's hands to accomplish his God-given task, he chose to live to please himself. How tragic it is when God gives a young person a wonderful heritage and a great opportunity, and he or she treats it lightly.

### **II. He Defied His Parents (14:1–4)**

One evidence of spiritual decline can be the way we get along with our loved ones. "Samson went down ..." (14:1) is true both spiritually and geographically. Instead of staying in the borders of Israel, he went into enemy territory and fell in love with a heathen woman. He knew the laws of separation God had given to the Jews, but he chose to ignore them (see Ex. 34:16; Deut. 7:3; and 2 Cor. 6:14–18; also Gen. 24:1–4). Note that he *told* his parents; he did not *ask* them. And when they reminded him of God's law, he defied them. "Get her for me," he insisted, "for she pleases me well!" It did not bother Samson that his desires displeased his parents. Note that in this instance God mercifully was going to overrule his sin and use it to weaken the Philistines (v. 4). Christian young people need to stop and consider carefully when they find themselves defying godly parents who know God's Word.

### **III. He Defiled His Body (14:5–20)**

In those days, the parents arranged for a marriage, and there was several months time between the engagement and the wedding. When Samson met the lion, God gave him the power to overcome it even though Samson was not walking completely in God's will. When he came back months later to complete the marriage, he found honey in the carcass of the lion. Numbers 6:6–9 tells us that a Nazarite was never to touch a dead body, but Samson deliberately defiled himself for the sake of the honey! How many Christians today defile themselves just to enjoy a little honey in the carcass of a lion—perhaps a popular book, a movie, or a questionable friendship. Sad to say, Samson passed the sin along to his parents, and then he made a joke about it to entertain his friends! As a Nazarite and a Jew, he had no right to be sharing in a worldly Philistine

wedding. The marriage was never completed, but the seeds of sin had already been planted in his heart.

#### **IV. He Disregarded God's Warning (15)**

This is a chapter of seeming victories, yet it ends with the "strong man" utterly exhausted for lack of water. He burned the fields of the Philistines, but they turned around and burned the house of the woman he had loved (15:6 with 14:15). Samson avenged their death, but then his own people turned against him and delivered him to the enemy (vv. 11–13). God delivered him, but then God warned him by showing him how weak he was. We find only two prayers of Samson: here, for water (vv. 18–20), and in 16:28, for strength to destroy the Philistines. His parents had been prayerful people, but Samson had not followed their example. God warned him here, but he would not heed the warning.

#### **V. He Deliberately Played with Sin (16)**

Samson had already gotten into trouble with one woman, but now he tried again, this time going deep into enemy territory to Gaza. Again, God warned him by allowing the enemy to almost catch him, but Samson still refused to repent. It was then that Delilah came into his life and led him to his doom. The Valley of Sorek was near his home, but Samson's heart was already far from God.

It shocks us to see this Nazarite sleeping on the lap of a wicked woman, but this is what happens when people choose to go their own way and reject the counsel of loved ones and the Lord. Three times Delilah enticed Samson, and three times he lied to her. Each time, the enemy attacked him, so he should have realized he was in danger. But read Prov. 7:21–27 to see why Samson yielded. He was asleep when he should have been awake! Remember the warning Christ gave to Peter in Matt. 26:40–41. Note that each lie Samson told actually took him closer to the truth. How dangerous it is to play with sin.

The rest of the story shows the tragic end of the believer who will not let God have his way with his life. From v. 20 on, Samson does nothing but lose. He loses his hair, the symbol of his Nazarite dedication; for that dedication had long since been abandoned. Then he loses his strength, but he is ignorant of it until he is overpowered. How futile it is for the servant of God to try to serve the Lord when out of His will. Next Samson loses the light, for the Philistines put out his eyes. He loses his liberty, for they bind him with fetters of brass. He loses his usefulness to the Lord, for he ends up grinding corn instead of fighting God's battles. Someone has said that v. 21 pictures the blinding, binding, and grinding results of sin. And all of this began when Samson despised his blessings and defied his parents!

Samson also lost his testimony, for he was the laughingstock of the Philistines. Their fish-god Dagon, not the God of Israel, was given all the glory. Apparently Samson repented of his sin, for God gave him one more chance to act by faith. His hair had begun to grow and Samson asked God for strength to win one more victory over the enemy. God answered his prayer, but in defeating others, Samson took his own life. Like Saul, Samson was a castaway; he had committed sin unto death, and God had to

take him off the scene (see 1 Cor. 11:30–31; 1 John 5:16–17). His loved ones claimed his body and buried him “between Zorah and Eshtaol”—the very place where he had started his ministry (13:25).

Samson illustrates people who have power to conquer others, but who cannot conquer themselves. He set the Philistine fields on fire, but could not control the fires of his own lust. He killed a lion, but would not put to death the passions of the flesh. He could easily break the bonds that men put on him, but the shackles of sin gradually grew stronger on his soul. Instead of leading the nation, he preferred to work independently, and as a result, left no permanent victory behind. He was remembered for what he destroyed, not for what he built up. He lacked discipline and direction; without these, his strength could accomplish little. He failed to check the impulses that began early in his career, and twenty years later, they killed him.

It remained for Samuel and David in later years to finally defeat the Philistines. Samuel by one prayer accomplished more than Samson did in twenty years of fighting (see 1 Sam. 7:9–14).