

“The LORD Raised Up Judges”

The eighty-ninth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 2:16-23; Jude 3-23

The Book of Judges is a fascinating but perplexing book. The book covers that period of Israel’s history between the death of Joshua (the Conquest) and that time when David becomes Israel’s first king (the monarchy). There are some very colorful and well-known biblical characters to be found here—Samson, Gideon and Deborah. There is also a reoccurring pattern found throughout this book. The people of God will turn their backs on YHWH, only to find that an unexpected enemy rises up against them, causing them to cry out to God for deliverance. God responds by sending Israel a deliverer. Throughout this sordid mess we will be a bit shocked that the people of God could actually do the things that they do. This is a book filled with heroes of questionable character, people who commit all kinds of sin and who make the most grievous errors in judgment. We may be equally surprised by the ways in which God rescues his people from the brink of disaster. All of this makes for a most interesting period in Israel’s history, but a difficult book from which to preach. Throughout the Book of Judges, God’s covenant faithfulness repeatedly triumphs over the sinful foibles of his people. Given this background, there will be much for us here by way of application. The Book of Judges will force us to consider the dangers of doing what seems right in our own eyes, instead of doing that which God commands of us in his word.

As we begin a new series on the Book of Judges we need to keep in mind the fact that the material we find in this book is but one chapter in the larger drama of redemptive history—hence our series on the history of the covenants, “I Will Be Your God and You Will Be My people.” If our study of Joshua and the Conquest found the Israelites living in obedience under a faithful leader—constituting the high water mark in redemptive history—the situation we find in Judges will be much different. Not long after Joshua died things were so bad that we read in Judges 2:10: *“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.”* Indeed, this is a sad and heart-breaking commentary.

Even as the dying Joshua warned Israel that the blessing-curse principle lies at the heart of the covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai, once the people of Israel settled in Canaan, they soon became complacent and unbelieving. By the time the next generation comes to the fore, the people are have already started to turn away from YHWH so as to worship and serve other “gods.” As a result, the people of Israel will face a whole series of judgments, most of them inflicted upon them by their pagan neighbors, who are, ironically, the very people of whom the Israelites were so envious, and who they were trying to emulate.

The fact that Israel fell into apostasy is not a really a surprise—or at least it shouldn’t be. What is a surprise is the speed at which the people of Israel fell away from YHWH. As we read in Judges 2:11-15, the spiritual condition of Israel was already in a sorry state not long after the death of Joshua. *“And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their*

enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.”

This, then, is what we will find in the Book of Judges. Israel is in a constant state of terrible distress and YHWH must come to their aid before the situation reaches the point of no return. Throughout this book, we will see human sinfulness in open display, directly alongside of God’s long-suffering mercy toward his rebellious people. In other words, the time of the judges is very much like our own!

Preaching through The Book of Judges is like preaching through the Book of Revelation. Given the complicated structure of the book, you can’t just jump in and get started without a bit of historical background and explanation. So, today we will survey this book and deal the basic questions: Who? When? What? and Why? before we get started with the first chapter, Lord willing, next time.

As for who wrote the Book of Judges, there is no author mentioned anywhere in the book and although Rabbinic tradition has argued that Judges was written by Samuel and many Christians have accepted this tradition, the fact of the matter is, we have no idea who the original author was. More than likely the unknown author lived at, or shortly after, the time of David. It is very likely that he utilized a number of written and oral sources which recount the events recorded here.¹

As for when, most scholars believe that the Book of Judges took its final form somewhere between 1000 B.C. down into the 700's. Some of the sources utilized by the author go all the back to the time of Joshua (especially in the opening chapters). Others are more recent. Some of these sources are quite detailed (over one hundred verses are devoted to Gideon), while other figures, such as Shamgar, are barely mentioned (one verse).²

As for what, the Book of Judges deals with several critical issues—some of which we have already touched upon but we now need to consider in more detail. As we saw in the final chapters of Joshua, it was imperative that the Israelites complete the conquest and that they drive out all the Canaanites from the land, as well as push them back off the frontier of Canaan. This was so that these Canaanites could not infiltrate back into the land and so that they would not exercise any religious influence upon the Israelites. Yet, as Joshua comes to the end of his life, this task had not been completed. In the twenty-five years or so between the time Joshua distributed the land among the twelve tribes and then gave his final speech to the leaders of Israel and renewed the covenant with all the people, we already see hints that the people of Israel have not cast away all their pagan trinkets, statues, amulets and images. This is stuff they have picked up after the Canaanites fled from the land or else, and this is even worse, which they had kept hidden for generations.

What is more, as we see in the second chapter of Judges, the children of the faithful generation of Israelites who lived during the time of the Conquest were not well catechized—we read in Judges that they *did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel*. They were now settled and comfortable in Canaan. They were raised as nomads, but now they were living in peace and prosperity. They failed to finish the charge Joshua gave to them, hence there are Canaanites once again in their midst as well as on

¹ See the helpful introduction to these matters in: Daniel Block, Judges, Ruth: The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 21-73.

² Michael Wilcock, The Message of Judges (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 17.

the frontier of Canaan. God had done his part—every promise was fulfilled. But Israel had not done its part. Their love for and obedience to YHWH is slowly but surely slipping away.

We also saw that after the death of Joshua, God did not raise up another covenant mediator. In his final two speeches, Joshua summoned the elders, the heads of the twelve tribes, the judges, and the officers of Israel and then to the people of Israel, to hear his final message. But there is no single successor or covenant mediator, such as Joshua, who succeeded Moses. A number of commentators have wrestled with this question and find this matter to lie at the very heart of correctly understanding the Book of Judges.³ Throughout Judges, we will read of God’s Spirit resting upon Israel’s leaders. In this we see a strong parallel to our own day and age in which Jesus has ascended to the Father’s right hand and is present with us through his Spirit who empowers us to discern, know and obey God’s will as it is revealed in Scripture, especially in light of Christ’s person and work. During the age of the Judges, the people did not yet have such clarity. The absence of a covenant mediator to whom God speaks actually forces Israel to reply upon their tribal leaders and the Levitical priests to help them discern God’s will which had already been revealed in the law. It is at this very point that the people’s hardness of heart, unbelief and sin become all too apparent. Instead of seeking to learn the will of God and then obey it, we sadly read that “*everyone did what was right in their own eyes*” (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

Throughout the Book of Judges, Israel is one nation, composed of the twelve tribes, but each with their own heads and leaders—much like the United States under the Articles of Confederation, but before the Constitution was ratified. Since there is not a single leader of the nation, as each tribe is governed independently. Recall however that the Levitical priests were scattered among forty-eight cities throughout the nation (Joshua 21). The Levites were supposed to conduct sacrifices for sin and instruct the people of Israel in the ways of the Lord. But the Levites fail miserably—a point to which we will return momentarily. Into this vacuum of leadership, God sends a series of “Judges” to lead his people, but the judges too repeatedly fail, so that by the time we complete the bulk of the book, we will read four times in the last five chapters that “*there was no king in Israel*” (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

What this means is that during this period of redemptive history, God was preparing his people for a Davidic king, who, in turn, would point ahead to Jesus Christ.⁴ Given human sin and Israel’s propensity for idolatry, its no doubt that someone living at the time of David, looking back at the time of the judges, would see how important the need for a king truly is. And yet, even under David’s reign, Israel remained a stubborn and rebellious people—just as we remain sinful and stubborn.

As for the title “Book of Judges,” we read in the opening verse of Ruth (which comes from the same time and describes the same period in Israel’s history) that this was “*in the days when the judges ruled.*” But we need to carefully define what we mean when we speak of an Israelite “judge.” As we read in the first verse of our Old Testament Lesson (Judges 2:16), “*then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.*” Now, when we think of a judge, we think of a jurist in a black robe presiding over a court. But that’s not what these judges were. Instead, we should think of these judges as “*deliverers.*”⁵ For one thing, according to Judges 11:27, the LORD alone is judge of Israel. He

³ Wilcock, *The Message of Judges*, 15.

⁴ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 87.

⁵ Cundall, *Judges & Ruth*, 15; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 21-23

alone knows the hearts and minds of his people and can render true verdicts about the people. Furthermore, these men (along with Deborah) will reveal themselves to be more like tribal chieftains, or even “warlords” as one commentator calls them.⁶ Some of these judges are folk of renown, Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, and Sampson, while others such as Shamgar, barely get a mention in the text.

While God raised these “judges” up to deliver his people, we will see that they are a mixed bag. They defend the nation against its enemies, but they do not defend the faith against paganism. In Judges 2:17-23, we read the sad story that Israel’s spiritual health and vitality did not improve under their reign. In fact, things continued to go downhill during this time. *“Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved 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 afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he said, ‘Because this people has transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their fathers did, or not.’ So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.”*

One of the themes which reoccurs throughout Judges is that while these individual deliverers (judges) all served as God’s agents in rescuing Israel from various enemies, not one of them has the spiritual insight to deal with the real problem facing the nation—its sin. While we read of one judge who did do this (Samuel), he is omitted from those named in the Book of Judges.⁷ His story is told elsewhere. But if the judges failed to deliver the Israel from its spiritual lethargy, what can we say of the Levites, whose job it was to conduct sacrifices and instruct the people in the ways of the LORD? They were an utter failure.

What happened? As we will see in the opening chapters of Judges, when Israel arrived in Canaan they were a united covenant community with a single covenant mediator (leader). The organized Canaanite armies had been crushed and as the Israelites settled in the land, they built local sanctuaries as places to worship YHWH. Because the twelve tribes were unified by a national covenant, but had no national leader, national ceremonies like those conducted by Joshua gave way to localized worship throughout the country conducted by the Levites. Furthermore, the Levites failed to establish a permanent home for the tabernacle or the ark of the covenant. This meant that things went from more organized worship (under Joshua and Eleazar) to the sad condition in which everyone basically did their own thing. Without regular national ceremonies of covenant renewal and apart from the reading of the blessings and curses of the covenant to all the people, Israel quickly degenerated into apostasy and paganism.

While that was going on, the surviving Canaanites who fled during the Conquest, quietly began to move back into their ancestral homes in Canaan. This time the Israelites failed to cast them out and then keep them out. It would not be long before YHWH was worshiped by Israelites at these local sanctuaries

⁶ Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 588-589.

⁷ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 40.

alongside Canaanites who were worshipping their ancestral gods in the same locations. A Canaanite could worship Baal and think nothing of adding YHWH to the equation, simply making YHWH head of the pantheon of pagan gods. Yet in practice, Baal (the storm-god) seemed more relevant than YHWH who seemed so far away. Over time, the Israelites followed suit by first allowing the pagans to worship their gods at or near the sanctuaries of YHWH (where the Canaanites worshiped their gods previously). It was a small step for Israelites to simply add these pagan practices to their own worship of YHWH. Although the people put YHWH first with their mouths, as we will see, it was the pagan religious practices that soon began to dominate Israel's religious life. The people of Israel began to intermarry with the Canaanites and adopt their religious practices without so much as a thought. And it was not long before the people of Israel began to worship Baal and erect Asherah poles as a sign of allegiance to male/female divinities, who would, hopefully ensure fertility.⁸ No longer did they trust YHWH to provide.

This apostasy (falling away from the true faith) not only brings down YHWH's wrath upon the nation (despite his long-suffering patience), but this occurs on the Levites' watch. In fact, the last part of Judges (chapters 17-21) makes it very clear that it was the failure of the Levites to instruct the people in the biblical faith (catechism) which lies at the heart of Israel's rebellion and the people's desire to do what is right in their own eyes. In fact, the famous expression from Judges repeated two times—"*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes*"—is the both the first and final verse in the discussion of the failure of the Levites in the final chapters. This is a sad, but very fitting epitaph to this time in Israel's history when the religious leaders failed so badly.

Well, having answered the "who," "when" and "what" questions related to the Book of Judges, we can now turn to the "why?" question. I have already mentioned the reoccurring pattern throughout this book of Israel's sin leading to God's judgment, which leads to Israel's cry for help, and then God sending them a deliverer. It might help to look at this in a bit more detail.

A major hint as to what is going on in this book is given to us back in Genesis 22:1 where we read that "*God tested Abraham.*"⁹ Throughout the era of the judges God is clearly testing Israel. If that generation which left Egypt was unfaithful and died in the desert, and if the next generation which entered Canaan was faithful, what would happen to future generations of Israelites? To settle that question God will allow Israel's neighbors to wage war and attack Israel again and again. Israel defeated the Canaanites only because YHWH fought for them. If the people remain faithful to the covenant, they will continue to win these military battles. But if the people of Israel turn their back on YHWH, they will suffer greatly at the hand of the marauding armies who will sweep down upon them.

Israel's disobedience will quickly lead to what one writer calls a "Canaanization" of Israel. Just as Adam's trouble began well before he ate from the tree when he failed to cast the serpent out of Eden, *before* he could do his evil work, so too Israel's troubles begin when the people fail to cast out the Canaanites from within their midst and off their borders. What was Edmund Burke's famous line?—"the only thing needed for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."¹⁰ As the Canaanites returned and began to practice their paganism, over time, the Israelites simply joined them. Altars to Baal were

⁸ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 40-44.

⁹ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 617.

¹⁰ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 617-618.

erected all around Israel, even near their own sacred places at Gilgal, Shiloh and Shechem. Even the judges God will raise up are influenced by the Canaanite paganism all around them. Even though the Levites were responsible to catechize the people, they failed to do so. And so more and more Israelites became functioning pagans and fewer and fewer of their children knew anything about YHWH or the things he has done for them in Egypt, the wilderness or during the Conquest. Faith becomes disinterest. Disinterest becomes unbelief.

As the people of Israel drift away from the LORD, God sends a series of covenant judgments. The prosperity they had known will become poverty. The land they own will be taken from them. Their houses will be burned, their crops ruined, their animals will die. They will lose battle after battle and become increasingly demoralized. God's prophets will come and warn the people, but they will not listen. As a result, YHWH's hand of judgment will fall upon them. When it does, the people of Israel will remember the better days of the past and cry out to the LORD for deliverance. As we read in Judges 10:15-16, *"And the people of Israel said to the Lord, 'We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day.' So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel."* While Israel deserves nothing but God's judgment which they have brought down upon themselves, YHWH hears their cries and delivers them.

While all these deliverers are flawed and sinful, nevertheless, we read in chapter 11:32-34 of the Book of Hebrews looking back on this period of time, *"And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight."* As we will see "the LORD raised up judges," because even though his people are weak and sinful, he is a merciful God who never forgets his covenant promises. Sinful judges/delivers in turn point us to a sinless deliverer, whose death will pay for our sins and who conquered death and the grave for our justification.

As we go through this book, what should we be looking for in terms of application? The Book of Judges is in one sense, the story of God's people living in the midst of paganism, struggling to be faithful, but also constantly being pulled away from the true and living God by all of the temptations around them. Israel's struggle during the time of the judges is very similar to the struggles we face every day. We are a Christian people in a pagan land. We are constantly pulled away from Christ toward false religion. Our beliefs are mocked, our faith is attacked by pagans, cults and secularists, and we live in a land where everyone does what is right in his or her eyes with no regard to what God has revealed in his word. Just as God sent "judges" to deliver Israel, it is not a theological stretch to say that God "rescues" us from being overwhelmed by paganism by raising up churches in our midst where the gospel of Christ crucified is preached and the sacraments administered according to the word of God. God has done this for his people from the beginning.

As we read in our New Testament lesson, Jude warns us that *"certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."* This is almost identical to the situation at the time of Judges when Canaanites crept back into Canaan, perverting true worship of YHWH. In fact, it is Jude who tells us that the story of the Exodus, Conquest and Judges is really the story of Jesus Christ rescuing his people from the perils around them. *"Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward*

destroyed those who did not believe.” This, then, is the first type of application we must draw from our time in Judges. Even though Judges portrays a horrible time of distress, in these flawed judges, we see men who are types of a flawless Christ. Just as God delivered Israel from the Canaanites, so too he has delivered us from our true enemy (sin and its wages) through the cross and the empty tomb.

After describing the efforts of those who attempt to deceive us, in verses 17-23, Jude exhorts us, *“But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’ It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.”* As we go through the Book of Judges and learn of the struggles of Israel in the face of the pagan temptation which was everywhere around them, so too Jude instructs us that the way we remain faithful against similar challenges is to build ourselves up in the most holy faith.

We build ourselves up by learning to discern truth from error—this means learning the basics of the faith, especially the gospel. We can’t just assume that people understand it. We must continually preach Christ and him crucified! And while we must be compassionate to those with doubt and who struggle with sin, we must never tolerate false doctrine in the church. As Jude tells us and as we see in Judges, this is where apostasy starts. Toleration of heresy and error is the seed which inevitably grows unto the tree of destruction. This is why we must defend the gospel against all who challenge it. And this is why we must teach the Christian faith to our children and to our children’s children— if we do not catechize them in the truths of the Christian faith, the pagan culture will catechize with the lies of paganism. We must not do as the Levites did and fail to catechize ourselves and our children. This is what Israel failed to do and this is why paganism soon took root. It will just as easily take root in our midst, if we let it.

But God raised up judges for Israel to deliver them. Beloved, he has done much more for us. He has sent his own son, the deliverer, and as long as Jesus is our shield and defender, the gates of hell cannot prevail against us!