

JUDGES

OVERVIEW

The Book of Judges continues the story of the people of Israel following the death of Joshua and ends as they are about to be led by a king. It covers approximately the years 1380 BC to 1050 BC. We do not know who wrote the book. The Talmud attributes it to Samuel but that is not certain. It was probably written in the period between Saul's anointing as king and David's conquest of Jerusalem. This period is likely because in 17:6 it says that these things happened at a time when Israel had no king, implying that they did by the time it was written down, and in 1:21 it says that at that time the Jebusites lived in and controlled Jerusalem, which they continued to do until David displaced them (2 Samuel 5:6,7).

The people of Israel during this period rejected God as their king and disobeyed His commandments and Law. As a result of this God allowed them to suffer the consequences of their rejection of Him. This is a book of defeat, disgrace and confusion, as we see in the key verse (17:6):

"Every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

The book of Judges recounts for us:

- the failure of a second generation
- the salvation available from a long-suffering God
- the confusion of a people who become depraved and far from God.

All of these themes have relevance to us today.

So, 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. There is a cyclical pattern to the history and we have a summary of the entire book in chapter 2 verses 10 -19:

- blessing
- disobedience
- chastening
- repentance
- deliverance

Judges is a 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.

Judges is not only an historical book, it is also a theological and spiritual book. Theologically it serves to strengthen the principle that obedience to the Law would bring peace and life but disobedience would bring oppression and death (see Deuteronomy chapter 28 for Moses' warnings prior to the Israelites entering the Promised Land). Spiritually it shows that God is faithful to His covenant promised to His covenant people (Israel). When His people turned to Him in repentance He forgave them and raised up leaders (Judges) from amongst them to deliver them from their oppression. These leaders were often inspired and empowered by His Spirit.

The incidents recorded in the book are geographically spread throughout the Promised Land as the Israelites interacted with surrounding tribes and invaders of the land.

When reading Judges we should remember that this period covers the time after Joshua and his generation conquered much of the Promised Land but not all. There are brutal accounts of conflict that perhaps offend our modern sensibilities. We need to bear in mind that God didn't give the Promised Land to the Israelites because they deserved it or were good. He gave them the land because He wanted to destroy the Canaanites for their wickedness (see Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 9:4 – 6 and 18:9 – 14). We should perhaps note that the book of Ruth is set during the period of the Judges.

A suggested outline of Judges

I. Apathy (1-2)

- A. Early victories (1:1-26)
- B. Repeated defeats (1:27-36)
- C. Divine rebukes (2:1-5)
- D. Serving other gods (2:6-23) – a summary of the entire book

II. Apostasy (3-16)

Principal Judges

Chapters	Judge(s)	Oppressors/opponents
3:1 – 11	Othniel	Mesopotamia
3:12 - 30	Ehud	Moab
3:31	Shamgar	Philistines
4 & 5	Deborah (and Barak*)	Canaanites
6 – 8	Gideon	Midianites
9:1 – 10	Abimelech^, Tola and Jair	Men of Schechem
11:1 – 12:15**	Jephthah	Ammon
13 – 16	Samson	Philistines

* Barak was the commander of Israel's armies who accompanied Deborah who was a Judge

^ Abimelech was not raised up by God and can best be termed a tyrant ruler rather than a Judge.

** After Jephthah there were three Judges whose influence was not as influential as those named in the table:

Ibzan 12:8 – 10

Elon 12:11 – 12

Abdon 12:13 - 15

III. Anarchy (17-21)

- A. Idolatry (17-18) – Micah's idolatry and his private priest (17) and the emigration of the Danites (18)
- B. Immorality (19) – the Levite's concubine and Gibeah's crime
- C. Civil war and slaughter (20-21) – caused by the incidents recorded in chapter 19. The tribes of Israel rise up against Benjamin. There is much bloodshed and the other tribes declared that they would not allow their daughters to marry a Benjamite. After the war, wives are provided for Benjamite men from amongst the people of Jabesh Gilead (following the slaughter of all the males and non-virgin females in Jabesh Gilead).

The final verse makes bleak reading;

***“In those days there was no king in Israel;
everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”***

Judges Chapters 2& 3

Following the death of Joshua a generation of Israelites grew up who did not know or obey the Lord. They did not know the history of their people or what God had done for them in the past. They turned to the local “gods” (principally Baal and Ashtoreth). God, in His righteous anger, allowed them to be defeated by the tribes and raiders who still lived in the land. When the Israelites cried out to God for deliverance He raised up people who saved them from their enemies. The word translated as “cried out” is the Hebrew word *“za’aq”*. This word means to cry out in great distress or anguish (see Isaiah 30:19, Hosea 7:14, Psalm 107:13, 19). However it does not necessarily mean that the Israelites were repentant. Where there is repentance attached to *za’aq* there will usually be another word or phrase associated with it that denotes that the crying out was accompanied by repentance and possibly confession (see Judges 10:10, 1 Samuel 12:10). In Judges, God responds to their distress from His heart of compassion for His people. Some of these people are named and their stories are preserved for us in scripture, others remain unnamed but known to God. However, time after time the people quickly forgot God and went their own way again. The pattern for the whole of this period in Israel’s history is set out in chapter 2:16 - 23. In chapter 3 we have the stories of three of the first of the leaders.

Othniel (7 – 11)

Othniel was faithful Caleb’s young nephew and son-in-law. His name may mean *“God is my strength”* or *“God helps me”*. In chapter 1 we read that he had already shown his courage in taking Kirjath-sepher, which appears to have been a very hazardous exploit. By his natural valour, experience in war, and the influence of the Holy Spirit, he was well qualified to inspire his countrymen to victory.

The Israelites were being oppressed by a Mesopotamian king called Cushan-Rishathaim. This was because they had disobeyed God and had begun to follow the Baals and Asherahs (7). For eight years this king oppressed them. The king’s name means *“Cushan of double wickedness”*. It is possible that his name was simply Cushan but his reputation for wickedness was added to emphasise his character. The area of Mesopotamia is literally *“called Aram-naharaim”* which means *“Aram-double rivers”*. In the Hebrew the assonance of Rishathaim and naharaim would be obvious.

When the Israelites cried out in their distress God heard them and raised up Othniel to lead them. The Spirit of God came upon Othniel (10). God gave him victory in battle over Cushan-Rishathaim. God gave him into Othniel’s hand. We see the hand of God sovereignly ruling in the affairs of men. For forty years the country was at peace (at rest) following Othniel’s victory. This was an opportunity for God’s people to rebuild their lives in freedom and to serve God as He required. We do not learn anything about what happened in this period or what Othniel did as a judge in a time of peace.

Ehud (12 – 30)

Following the death of Othniel the Israelites again fell away from God and behaved wickedly (12). God gave them into the hands of Eglon, king of Moab. The Moabites were descended from Lot. He made an alliance with the Ammonites and Amalekites. Together they took the *“City of Palms”* (13) and brought the Israelites into subjection to their rule. The location of this city is unclear but is likely to be in the region of Jericho. Jericho is called the City of Palms in Deuteronomy 34:3 but at this time it was still in ruins after Joshua’s conquest and was not rebuilt until the time of King Ahab (see 1 Kings 16:34). For eighteen long years he oppressed the Israelites.

The Israelites eventually cried out to the Lord and He raised up a man called Ehud to lead them. He is described as a deliverer or saviour. Ehud was a Benjamite and was left handed (ironically, Benjamin means *“son of my right hand”*). His name means *“united”* or *“strong”*. Single-handedly and purely by his wits, he killed the king of Moab. Being left-handed, Ehud was able to conceal a dagger on the side where it was not expected.

Ostensibly bringing the required tribute to Eglon, Ehud enters the king’s chambers alone and kills him with his 18” dagger (21, 22). After killing the king and escaping he rallied the men of Ephraim to follow him. He encouraged them by declaring that the Lord had given their enemies into their hands (28). He attributes the coming victory to the Lord. The Israelites seized the fords of the Jordan and killed 10,000 of the

Moabite army. The defeat of the Moabite army happened at the ford where Joshua had probably crossed the Jordan years earlier. No doubt the retelling of the story of Ehud's actions would have been well loved by the Israelites. The physically large man who had oppressed them was brought low and his military might crushed all because a lone man from a small tribe who had courage and a plan. Following this the Israelites had peace for eighty years (or until 80 years after Othniel's first judgeship). Sadly we read that when Ehud was dead the Israelites again did evil in the sight of the Lord (4:1).

Shamgar (31)

There is only one verse on this man. We know little of his exploits on behalf of God's people. He appears to have been a leader at the same time as Deborah but in a different part of the country. His opponents were the Philistines whereas Deborah would lead the struggle against the Canaanites. Shamgar's name is foreign and so it is possible that he was not even an Israelite. He was the "son of Anath" which may mean that he came from Beth Anath (see 1:33 a town in Galilee that Naphtali failed to take) or a similarly named town in Judah (Joshua 15:59 which is closer to Philistine territory than Galilee).

His name may also mean that his family worshipped the goddess Anath. Anath was Baal's sister and she was a goddess of war who fought for Baal. The expression "son of Anath" may have been a military title meaning "a warrior". His use of an ox goad which is a long, wooden rod with a metal tip used by farmers for driving animals reminds us that during this period the Israelite's often had to use improvised weapons (see also Jael's tent peg 4:22, Gideon's jar and torches 7:20, a millstone 9:53, Samson's jaw bone 15:15). Shamgar is later referred to in the song of Deborah (5:6). The fact that he is probably not an Israelite shows that God is able to use anyone to aid His people (think of Cyrus in Isaiah 45:1 – 7).

Questions to consider

1. Why is history important to us as Christians?
2. Why does God respond to the Israelites distress even when there is no indication of repentance?
3. How, if at all, can we justify Ehud's murder of Eglon?
4. What relevance do these stories have for us today?
5. Does it matter if Shamgar is an Israelite or not?

Judges Chapters 4 & 5

Deborah and Barak

These two chapters tell the story of Deborah's triumph over Sisera (the commander of a Canaanite army). Chapter 4 gives the narrative and chapter 5 celebrates the event in song. Deborah's song is regarded as one of the oldest pieces of writing in the Old Testament.

Chapter 4

Once again, we find that the Israelites fell away from following God and His ways. The result is that they fell under the power of a king of Canaan called Jabin. His army commander was called Sisera. The threat from the Canaanites came from the north of the country (Hazor). Joshua defeated an earlier Jabin (Joshua 11) and destroyed the city. The lower part was never rebuilt, but the mound (*tell*) was re-fortified by the Canaanites, and later by Solomon.

The Israelites were unable to take united action against the Canaanites until Deborah, who lived further south near Jerusalem, summoned them to the Lord's battle. Deborah was not only a judge in the judicial sense (she arbitrated their disputes) she was also the only judge to be also called a prophet. She lived in the hill country of Ephraim, close to where Ehud had earlier raised the trumpet to summon Israel to fight against the Moabites (see 3:27). The scene of action is to the north of Ephraim whereas in Ehud's time it was in the south of that territory.

Deborah called Barak to be the military leader but he is reluctant to act without Deborah at his side. Barak's name means "thunderbolt" and he is named among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:32. He wanted God's chosen leader with him to be sure of success. He did his duty in relation to the leader of God's people, his faithfulness to God and Deborah is recognised by God. He may not have received the glory of the victor but he received a crown of glory at the hands of His Lord.

Together they unite 6 tribes to move against the Canaanites (Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, Issachar, Naphtali and Manasseh). In the song of chapter 5 the tribes of Reuben, Gad, Asher and Dan are rebuked for not coming to the aid of their fellow Israelites. Simeon and Judah are not mentioned as they were possibly fighting the Philistines in the south at the time. Levi is not mentioned because that tribe did not have any military responsibility.

Deborah's strategy was to lure the Canaanites into a trap by placing forces on Mount Tabor where their iron chariots could not operate well. The Israelite position was possibly betrayed by Heber, a Kenite whose tribe had previously been allied to the Israelites. Heber had moved from the south of the country where the Kenites usually lived to the area that was now the scene of conflict. Had he rejected the inheritance of his ancestors and their friendship with Israel? On learning the position of the Israelite army, Sisera, the Canaanite commander, therefore forced the battleground to be in the valley of Jezreel rather than on the mountainside. This meant that he could use his 900 chariots. However, he had not reckoned on the Lord being on Israel's side. The Lord unleashed a powerful storm and flood which washed away the chariots (see 5:4, 20, 21) and aided Barak and his men to rout their enemy. Israel's enemies were completely destroyed. As his army was slaughtered Sisera fled to the tent of Jael (Heber's wife) where he expected hospitality and a place of refuge. Generally, men would not enter a woman's tent and so it was unlikely that the pursuing Israelites would look for him there. However, Jael did not betray her people's former allies and contrived to murder Sisera. Deborah's prediction in verse 9 was fulfilled, a woman would have the honour of killing Sisera. The unexpected way in which the Israelites enemy is killed reminds us perhaps of Ehud from chapter 3. With this overwhelming victory the power of Jabin and the Canaanites over the Israelites was effectively ended.

Chapter 4 could be outlined as follows:

- The sons of Israel oppressed 1 – 3
- Deborah the judge and prophetess 4 – 9
- Barak and Sisera call out (*ya'aaq*) 10 -12, 13

- God the warrior 14
- Barak and Sisera go down (*yarad*) 14b – 16
- Jael the wife of Heber 17 – 22
- Jabin the king of Canaan subdued 23 – 24

Chapter 5 The song of Deborah

Following the victory Deborah and Barak led the people in a victory song. This was a common practice (see Exodus 15:1 - 18, Numbers 21:27 -30). The song highlights some of the central themes of the narrative. It celebrates before the nations the righteous acts of the Lord and of his warriors. The song proclaims God's greatness by giving him the credit for the victory. The song can be divided into 8 sections:

- 1) the purpose and occasion of the song 2 – 9 – the land and people were suffering under oppression until Deborah arose
- 2) an exhortation of Israel to act heroically as in the past 10 – 11 - in the future if oppression comes remember what God has done in the past
- 3) the people's appeal to Deborah 11 – 12 – a cry for leaders of God's people to emerge
- 4) the gathering of the warriors 13 – 18 – the people respond to their leaders' call, although some refused to be counted amongst God's victorious army
- 5) the battle itself 19 – 23 – God gave His people victory, unleashing a devastating storm against His people's enemies
- 6) the crafty triumph of Jael over Sisera 24 – 27 – Jael is commended for her actions in killing Sisera, there is no condemnation of her deceit
- 7) the anxious waiting of Sisera's mother and the Canaanite women 28 – 30 – the anxieties of the Canaanite women are contrasted with the triumphs of Israel's female champions
- 8) conclusion 31 - a prayer that the present victory would be the pattern for future battles against the Lord's enemies

Following the song, we are told that the land had peace for forty years.

Questions to discuss

1. What would you say are the most useful and important lessons to learn from Deborah's example?
2. How does God, in His providence, provide for Israel's deliverance and Sisera's death?
3. What emotions do you think were behind the song that Deborah and Barak sing?
4. Why does Deborah go into such detail in her victory song?

Judges Chapters 6 - 8

Gideon

Following the triumph under Deborah and Barak the Israelites had peace for 40 years but, yet again, they fell away from God and did evil in His sight. Again, the consequence was that they fell into the hands of foreign oppressors. This time it was Bedouin from the east, the Midianites, who swept through southern Israel as far as the Philistine city of Gaza. The Midianites were descended from Abraham's second wife (Keturah (Genesis 25:1,2). The terror spread by these fierce camel-riders is vividly pictured in 6:2 where we are told that some of the Israelites hid in caves and mountain clefts. The Israelites lived in constant fear of their enemies. As an example of this Gideon is forced to thresh his meagre grain harvest secretly, in the confines of the wine press (6:11). Eventually they cried out to the Lord (6:6). The Lord responded by sending an unnamed prophet to them who rebuked them for forgetting that the Lord had saved them from Egyptian bondage and had given them the land (6:7 – 10).

Gideon is the man who God uses to stir up His people and lead them to victory. He is commissioned by God who appears to him at night. Gideon is at first fearful because he does not see himself as a warrior but, eventually, he acts on God's word and his faith rises. He asks for a sign from God that would show that it really was God he was speaking with. God confirms it with the sign of flame coming from a rock to consume an offering of meat and bread (6:17-23).

Gideon's first action is to destroy the idols that his own father had set up. This was commanded by the angel of the Lord (6:25). He does it at night accompanied by his servants. Because of his action in opposing the false gods Baal and Asherah the townspeople call him Jerub Baal which means "let Baal contend". The townspeople wanted to kill Gideon because of his actions but his father Joash intervened and said that if Baal was truly a god he could deal with Gideon himself (6:31).

His next action is the one that most people are familiar with. We find the narrative beginning in chapter 6 and continues in chapter 7. The Midianites and their allies (the Amalekites and others) come together and cross the Jordan and camp in the Valley of Jezreel. In response God's Spirit comes upon Gideon. He blew a trumpet to summon his clan (the Abiezrites) to follow him. He also sent messages to the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali calling them to arms. Gideon seeks God's to save the Israelites and asks for signs from Him involving a fleece (6:36 – 40). God confirms to Gideon through the signs that He would be with Gideon.

In chapter seven God speaks again to Gideon as he and his army are encamped near the hill of Moreh. God says that the army is too large (32,000 men) and any victory might be attributed to them rather than to Him. Gideon allows any who are fearful to return home and 22,000 leave (7:3). This is still too many for God and so he tells Gideon to separate the men between those who drink from a river by lapping with their tongues from those who use cupped hands. Only 300 of the remaining 10,000 men lapped with their tongues and these were the men who Gideon was told by God to lead into battle (7:7).

Gideon leads this small band of men to destroy the combined army of the Midianites, Amalekites and their allies. His faith, for all his initial caution, is seen in his preparedness to face the large enemy army with a force of only 300 men. Before the battle God told Gideon to attack at night but if he was afraid to, then he should go in secret and listen to what the enemy soldiers were saying. Gideon and his servant Purah secretly visited the enemy camp at night (7:11) and heard the soldiers discussing a strange dream that one of them said showed that Gideon would triumph because God was with him (7:14). This greatly encouraged Gideon (7:15) and he immediately returned to his troops with a plan of attack. He divided them into three groups. Armed only with an empty pitcher or jar with a torch inside and a trumpet, they surprised the enemy at night with a tremendous shout, "*the sword of the Lord and of Gideon*". Gideon's men reached the camp just as the guard was changing which meant that there was some movement already in the camp. They blew their trumpets, broke their jars and cried out. The Israelites simply held their ground around the camp, they had no need to attack and had no weapons to attack with. Panic broke out in the army of Midian. They turned on each other and fought together and then fled, with the Israelites in hot pursuit. The men of Manasseh, Naphtali and Asher also joined the pursuit. Gideon then called on the

men of Ephraim to battle. The Ephraimites seized the waters of Jordan as far as Beth Barah thus cutting off their enemy's flight. They killed two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb and brought their heads to Gideon who was by the Jordan (7:25). Victory was complete and God gave the land peace for forty years until Gideon's death. Gideon used his wits in the surprise attack, but the victory in the ensuing rout is God's.

In **chapter 8** we read how Gideon pursued the Midianites and dealt with those who would not give him aid in either the battle or with provisions. At the beginning of the chapter the men of Ephraim are unhappy that they were only called into the fight near the end. Gideon diplomatically encourages them by saying that they had managed to kill two of the Midianite leaders and would receive the glory for that (8:2,3).

Gideon's 300 men are by now weary but want to continue to pursue two of the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna. He asks for provisions from the men of Succoth and Peniel but they would not aid him because they doubted his ability to subdue the Midianites and feared reprisals from them later. Gideon promised them that he would deal with their towns when he had defeated the Midianite kings (8:7, 8:9). Gideon did indeed defeat the Midianite kings (Zebah and Zalmunna) and returned to punish the elders of Succoth and tore down the tower at Peniel, as he had promised (8:16,17). He killed the kings himself (8:21) because they admitted that they had killed some of Gideon's own brothers at Tabor (8:18 -21).

However, instead of glorifying God for these victories the Israelites sought to make Gideon king over them. He refused because he acknowledged that only the Lord was their rightful king (8:22 -3). Gideon asked each of them for gold taken from their plundering of the Midianites. He makes this into a golden ephod. Ephods were usually holy garments associated with the priesthood but also could be used by pagans as part of their idol worship. Sadly, the one made by Gideon became an idol and a snare to the nation and indeed to Gideon's own family (8:27).

The land had peace for 40 years. Gideon returned to his ancestral town of Ophrah. He had many wives and sons (70) and also a son by his concubine who lived in Schechem. This son, Abimelech, would later be instrumental in tearing apart Gideon's family and the nation (see chapter 9).

As soon as Gideon died the Israelites again fell into idol worship and chose Baal- Berith ("lord of the covenant") as their god. A temple to Baal -Berith was built at Schechem. Ironically this is the place where Joshua had renewed the Lord's covenant with Israel (Joshua 24:14 - 27). The Israelites forgot all that God had done and failed to show kindness to the family of Gideon.

Questions to discuss

1. How would you summarise what Gideon learns most about God in chapter 6?

2. What can we learn about faith from Gideon's example?

3. What can we learn from Gideon's story that might confirm Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 12:9?

4. Look at the last sentence in Gideon's statement in 8:23. How well do you think these words capture the main point of why God included this book in the Bible?

Judges Chapter 9

Abimelech

In stark contrast to the stories of God's anointed judges we now have the history of Abimelech. In many ways he is the antithesis of the Lord's appointed judges.

He was a son of Gideon. His mother was Gideon's concubine who lived in Schechem (see 8:31). He sets himself up like a Canaanite city king and follows the false god Baal (v4). He stands in stark contrast to his father who had attacked Baal worship and insisted that the Lord ruled over Israel. Abimelech attempted this Canaanite revival in the very place where Joshua had earlier reaffirmed Israel's allegiance to the Lord (Joshua 24:14 - 27).

Abimelech persuades his Canaanite relatives in Schechem that it would be better for them to be ruled by him than to be ruled by Gideon's 70 sons who were Israelites. They encourage the citizens of Schechem to follow him. The citizens of Schechem gave him finance from Baal's temple with which he hired a band of mercenaries. With his men he went to Ophrah and murdered his 70 half-brothers. Only one, Jotham, escaped. Abimelech slaughtered them like sacrifices on a stone. The men of Schechem then crowned Abimelech as their king. Effectively he inaugurated his kingship by using his Israelite half-brothers as his coronation sacrifices.

Jotham bravely addresses the men of Schechem and warns them of the danger they have placed themselves in by making Abimelech their king. He does this through a story in which Abimelech is likened to a thorn bush who offers shade and protection but, in reality, will swallow up everything that comes close. The buckthorn is common in the hills of Palestine and a constant menace to farming. It produces nothing of value and is an apt figure for Abimelech. Jotham grimly predicts that Abimelech and the people of Schechem would destroy each other.

After 3 years the Lord acts against Abimelech and the people of Schechem. A man called Gaal moves into the town and wins over the people to follow him against Abimelech. He is a descendant of Hamor the Hivite who had founded Schechem (see Gen. 33:19). Abimelech is aided by the governor of the city, Zebul, who also felt threatened by the rise of Gaal. Through a surprise attack on the city Abimelech and Zebul drove Gaal and his followers out of the city. On the following day Abimelech and his men attack the people of Schechem and destroy them and the town. A remnant of the citizens fortify a tower in the town but this is destroyed by Abimelech by fire (in fulfilment of Jotham's curse v 20).

Abimelech then attacks Thebez and its fortified tower. This time he is killed when a woman drops a millstone on his head. Rather than have the shame of being killed by a woman he asks his armour bearer to kill him with a sword. From the end of the chapter it is clear that God has acted to repay the wickedness of Abimelech and the people of Schechem.

Questions to discuss

1. Why do you think this story is included in the Bible?

2. Contrast Abimelech and his father Gideon.

Judges Chapter 10 - 12

Tola and Jair

After the time of Abimelech Israel was ruled by judges called Tola (from Issachar) and then Jair (from Manasseh). There was a period of peace for 45 years. Then the Israelites again turned away from serving God and bowed down to the gods of the surrounding tribes (10:6). Chapter 10 tells of eighteen years in which God gave them into the hands of their enemies because they had turned from Him. Eventually they cried out to God and He heard their cries. He initially rebuked them for forgetting that He had delivered them from their oppressors. They showed repentant hearts and v16 poignantly tells us *“And He could bear Israel’s misery no longer”*.

Jephthah

The men of Gilead wanted to resist the Ammonites but lacked the courageous military leadership necessary. Chapter 11 tells the story of the man God raised up to defeat Israel’s enemies. Jephthah was a social outcast who had been shamefully driven out of Gilead (Manasseh). He had become an outlaw without an inheritance in Israel. The elders of Gilead came to him and asked him to not only lead them in battle but also offered him the regional leadership if he was successful. At first Jephthah is wary of the people who had previously driven him out. They reiterate their promises and ratify them in the presence of the people and of God.

Initially Jephthah sends messengers to the Ammonites to claim the land they had taken from the Israelites. The Ammonites had claimed the land because they had conquered Moab and they claimed all Moabite land. The Amorite king Sihon had taken the land from Moab previously (Num. 21:29).

Jephthah gives the following reasons for Israel’s rightful ownership of the land:

1. Israel had taken it from Sihon king of the Amorites, not from the Ammonites (15-22)
2. the Lord had given the land to them (23-25)
3. Israel had long possessed it (26-27)

The king of Ammon ignored Jephthah’s message (v28).

The Lord anointed Jephthah for the task of driving out the Ammonites (v29). As was common at the time Jephthah made a vow to the Lord (31, 32). The vow was to prove very costly. He probably intended to make a burnt offering of an animal to God to mark success in battle. Tragically his rash vow cost the life of his only child. Jephthah and his unnamed daughter are not willing to break a vow made to the Lord. The Ammonites had been soundly defeated but it brought great grief to Jephthah. The episode reflects a tragic deterioration of understanding God’s ways, a condition resulting from the recurrent backslidings during this era.

In Chapter 12 we find that despite the great victory against the Ammonites all of Israel does not rejoice. The men of Ephraim felt that they had been slighted because they had not been part of the victory. This resulted in fighting between the tribes. Again, Jephthah tries diplomacy before battle. Following their victory, the Gileadites killed 42,000 Ephraimites who tried to escape back across the Jordan. Their speech/accents betrayed them as they could not say “shibboleth”, pronouncing it “sibboleth” instead.

Jephthah only led Israel for six years before he died. He was succeeded by three judges of whom we know little. Ibzan from Bethlehem (probably from Zebulun not Judah), Elon from Zebulun and Abdon from Ephraim. Their years of leadership totalled just 25.

Questions to discuss

1. What would you say are the most useful and important lessons to learn from the example of Jephthah in this chapter?

2. What are the major points in Israel’s history that Jephthah recounts in 11:14 - 27?

Judges Chapter 13-16

Samson

In these chapters we have recorded the life of one of the best known of all of the judges, Samson. The Lord raised up Samson to deliver Israel from a 40 year period of Philistine oppression. Israel had again entered into another phase of idolatrous worship. The Lord used the Philistines to chasten Israel. Unlike the other accounts of Israel's apostasy, there is no record of Israel's repentance prior to God raising up Samson as a deliverer. They do not cry out to God for help.

In many ways Samson typifies the nation of Israel:

- born by special divine provision
- consecrated to the Lord from birth
- endowed with unique power among his fellow men
- foolishly chases after foreign women, some of ill repute
- cleverly subdued by one of the women

We can see that he exemplified Israel, who in this period of the Judges constantly prostituted herself to Canaanite gods to her own destruction.

Samson's life

His birth (chapter 13)

Samson was born following an angelic visitation to the sterile wife of Manoah from the tribe of Dan. The angel said that the child was to be separated unto God from birth and subject to a Nazirite vow to abstain from wine, legally unclean food and to keep his hair from being cut. She was also to abstain from wine and other fermented drinks and from unclean foods (13:4). The angel told Manoah's wife that the child would begin to save the Israelites from the Philistines (13:5). God will bring salvation from nothingness. His parents were godly people who honoured the Lord. Manoah asked God for direction as to how to bring up the child (13:8) and God heard his prayer.

The angel repeated the instructions he had given to Manoah's wife regarding the abstentions that she was to be subject to while carrying the child (13:13, 14). Manoah sought to detain the angel by offering a meal but the angel instructed him instead to make a burnt offering to the Lord. He also tried to find out the name of the angel of the Lord but was told that it was beyond his understanding. (13:17,18). Manoah became fearful when the angel ascended in a flame but his wife realised that God had accepted their offering and was not afraid.

After Samson's birth we are told that the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him. We are not told how he encountered God but the following chapters show us how God gifted him with great strength.

His marriage (chapters 14 and 15:1 - 8)

Despite the example of his parents and the fact that the Spirit of the Lord was on him (13:25), Samson married a Philistine girl from Timnah. From 14:4 we can see that this was still part of God's plan because He wanted to stir up Israel against the Philistines and would use this marriage as a means of provoking dissension between them. Although his parents objected to him marrying the girl Samson ignored them and did what he wanted to do. His parents accompanied him to Timnah. On the way they were confronted by a lion which Samson killed with his bare hands as the Spirit of the Lord came upon him (14:6). Later as he returned to marry the girl he saw the lion's carcass filled with bees and honey. Note that he should not, as a Nazirite, have touched a carcass. Samson used this incident to tease the Philistines with a riddle (14:12). They could not solve the riddle and threatened Samson's new wife so that she might find out the solution to the riddle. She sobbed and implored him to reveal the answer and after several days he told her. When the men answered the riddle correctly Samson realised that they had somehow got the answer from his wife. He was full of anger. The result of the wedding feast and the quarrel that ensued was that Samson killed 30 Philistine men in Ashkelon. Samson then returned to his father's house. In the meantime his wife was given by her father to a friend who had attended the wedding (14:20).

Later that year he returned to find that his wife had been given to this other man and so in vengeance against the Philistines he destroyed their crops by fastening blazing torches to the tails of some foxes. In retaliation the Philistines killed Samson's wife and her father (15:6). Samson again took vengeance and killed many of them (15:8). Following this he left and stayed in a cave (15:8).

Samson captured for a first time (chapter 15:9 - 20)

The Philistines then moved into the territory of Judah in order to capture him. The men of Judah, 3000 of them, came to bind Samson to hand him over to the Philistines. They were so fearful of the Philistines that they would rather hand over Samson to them than confront them. They promised not to kill him (15:13). On reaching the Philistines he broke his ropes and killed a thousand men with only the jawbone of a donkey as a weapon.

Following his victory Samson was thirsty and God miraculously provided water for him and he was revived. This is the first time that we read of Samson crying out to the Lord for help. Samson may have been arrogant and violent but he was engaged in a battle against God's enemies and so God restored his strength. In 15:20 we are told that Samson now led Israel for twenty years.

Samson and Delilah (chapter 16)

Although he had great God-given strength and anointing Samson lacked moral strength (see 16:1-3) and this ultimately led to his downfall.

At the beginning of the chapter we find him in Gaza, which was a Philistine town, and he is there to spend the night with a prostitute. The people of Gaza intended to kill him in the morning but he escaped and tore the gates of the city off and carried them all the way to Hebron (about 40 miles).

Samson did not learn any lessons from his experiences with women. In verse 4 we find him in love again, this time with a woman called Delilah. She is the only woman who is actually named in the Samson stories. She lived in the Valley of Sorek which is an area that borders Judah and Philistia. We cannot be certain whether she was a Philistine or not. However we do know that she was easily persuaded by them to entrap and betray Samson. They bribed her to discover the secret of Samson's strength. The story of her deception is well known as are the consequences. Samson is brought low, blinded and humiliated by his enemies (16:21). Sadly Samson was not aware that the Lord had left him (16:20).

His enemies took him down to Gaza and humiliated him further by binding him in shackles and forcing him to grind corn in the prison. His final victory over God's enemies came with his own death. Shorn of his powers he cried out to the Lord to be avenged whilst in the Philistine temple of Dagon (16:28). God heard his prayer and restored his strength for one last triumph. In his death he killed more Philistines than in his lifetime (16:30). His body was brought back by his family and buried in his father's tomb. We are reminded again that he had led Israel for twenty years (16:31)

Questions to discuss

1. If you could go back in time and you could act as a counsellor to Samson what would you advise?
2. What can we learn from Manoah and his wife?
3. Did Samson's final cry to God indicate his repentance or a need for personal revenge?

Judges Chapters 17 - 18

The final five chapters of Judge do not follow the pattern of the first sixteen. Up to this point we have seen the repeated pattern of behaviour by the Israelites. They have followed the Lord, fallen into apostasy, been oppressed, cried out to God, He has raised up leaders (Judges) to bring them peace, they have served the Lord then fallen again. We do not find this pattern in the final chapters. Instead we find two accounts that perhaps typify their aberrant behaviour. In chapters 17 and 18 it is as if God is holding up a mirror and showing the Israelites what the consequences are of making their own Gods. In chapters 19 to 21 He shows them that when they fall away from Him they end up destroying their own people. In other words, rather than seeing the enemy outside the camp we see the enemies within the camp. Throughout these two chapters the underlying theme is the dangers of false religion and religious practices.

Chapter 17 Micah's idols

1 – 6

We have here a story of deception, idolatry, false religion. It begins with the theft of silver from a woman in the hill country of Ephraim. She has lost 1100 shekels of silver (about 28 pounds in weight). Evidently, she could not find out who had stolen it so called down a curse on the thief. Her son heard the curse and confessed that it had been him who had stolen the silver from her. Rather than be angry with him she thanked God and blessed her son. There is no hint of repentance by the son. The woman then says she will consecrate the silver to the Lord. This all sounds very good; she has been forgiving she has thanked the Lord and declared that the silver would be consecrated to the Lord. Sadly, first appearances are deceptive. Instead of fully giving the silver to the Lord she takes 200 shekels (from the 1100) and gives it to her son to make a silver image which he can keep.

The son duly has the image made and he puts it in his house. We now learn that in his house he has a shrine, an ephod and household gods. He also has a son who acts as a priest for him. How far Micah had strayed from what the Lord had commanded! In verse 6 we are told that in those days the Israelites had no king so everyone did as they saw fit. They certainly did not have God as their King.

7 – 13

The story moves on and we see that a Levite from Bethlehem arrives where Micah is living. It seems likely that with the decline in obedience to God's Law the Levites were not being provided for as God had commanded so Levites had to find other ways to support themselves.

Micah offers the Levites a position in his household as a priest. He would pay him ten shekels of silver each year and provide him with clothes and food. The Levite (Jonathan 18:30) agreed with Micah's proposal and became a household priest working with the idols and ephod supplied to him. Micah is delighted with the arrangement and believes that the Lord would bless him because of the arrangement. We can perhaps see that in Micah we see an example of the religious falling away of the Israelites as a whole and the Levite as an example of the falling away of the Levites.

Chapter 18 The Danites arrive

1 – 6

Back in chapter 1 verse 34 we were told that the Amorites had confined the tribe of Dan to the hill country. Dan had not taken possession of the territory allotted to them. Now in chapter 18 verse 1 we find that they have still not done so. They were however now actively seeking to find somewhere to permanently settle. They sent out five leaders to spy out possible areas to move into. Eventually they come to the hill country of Ephraim to the north. They come to Micah's house. Somehow, they recognised the voice of the young

Levite. How this is we are not told? Had he at one time been in the area of the Danites or was it just that his accent showed he was not an Ephraimite?

The Danites question the Levite about what he was doing in Micah's house. On learning that he was Micah's household priest they asked him to inquire of God as to whether their journey would be successful. He said that their journey had the Lord's approval (v6). They then continued their journey.

7 – 13

The spies travelled further north to Laish. There they found a peaceful, prosperous settlement. The people there were friendly with the people of Sidon (on the coast further north). The spies returned to Zorah and Eshtaol and encouraged the Danites to attack Laish. They said that God had given the people of Laish into their hands. This is unlikely because the was not where God had allotted them for an inheritance. An army of 600 men together with women, children and livestock (v 21) set out from Zorah and Eshtaol to attack Laish. On the way they camped near Kiriath Jearim in Judah. Moving on from there they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to Micah's house.

14 – 21

The spies encourage the Danites to steal Micah's ephod, household gods and silver image. The five spies went into the house to steal the items. They were challenged by the priest but he was soon won over when they offered him the position of priest for their tribe. He carried the items away and together with the Danites moved on.

22 – 31

After they had travelled some distance Micah and his men caught up with them It was obvious that they were heavily outnumbered and soon returned to Micah's house empty handed. The Danites carried on to Laish. We are again told that the town was at peace and secure. The people of Laish were unprepared for the Danite attack. The Danites overwhelmed them, killed them and destroyed the city.

The Danites then rebuilt the city and renamed it Dan. Here they set up for themselves the idol stolen from Micah and Jonathan the priest and his sons as priests for their tribe. We are told now that the Levite was descended from Moses' son Gershon (30). They used this idol all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh (about 80 miles away). At this time the worship of God should have been under the auspices and authority of the Levites scattered throughout the twelve tribes with Shiloh as the centre. Adult males were required to travel to Shiloh for certain religious feasts. The men of Dan were disobedient again. The sanctuary of Dan was based on a double theft, no wonder they would eventually come to ruin.

Questions to discuss

1. How do these stories speak about God' judgement on false religion?
2. Does either Micah's or the Danites success indicate God's blessing on their actions?
3. How would you describe the spiritual condition of the people seen in these chapters?

Judges Chapters 19 – 21

The final three chapters of Judges make for uncomfortable reading. They record a terrible story of moral depravity, perhaps the worst recorded in Scripture. The incidents involved are not dated but clearly took place in the period of the Judges but at a time when there was no moral or religious leadership amongst the Israelites. There is a breakdown in the moral and legal order of the country. There is a division amongst the tribes who turn against one of their own (Benjamin).

Chapter 19 The Levites concubine and Gibeah's crime

The story opens with a Levite who lived in the hill country of Ephraim. It is unlikely that he is the same Levite we read about in the previous chapters. This man had taken a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. He was living a sexually immoral life with her ("living in sin"). However this woman was not satisfied with being his concubine and "played the harlot" (v 2) against him. She then left him to return to her father in Bethlehem. After four months he followed her to her father's house to try to persuade her to return with him.

Evidently the man was well received by the woman's father who persuaded him to stay several days enjoying his hospitality. Eventually the man and the woman started their journey back to Ephraim. Their departure was delayed and it was late in the day before they set off. As they neared the city of Jebus (Jerusalem) his servant tried to persuade him to find lodgings for the night in the city but he refused because he did not want to spend the night among the Jebusites. He was determined to spend the night in a town or city that was controlled by Israelites. So they pressed on to Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin.

At Gibeah they halted at the markets square but could find no one to help them with hospitality from amongst the Benjamites. Eventually an elderly Ephraimite man approached them and offered them lodgings for the night. He was courteous and hospitable even washing their feet.

During the night a group of Benjamite men came to the house and demanded that the old man should hand over the Levite to them so that they could have sex with him. There are echoes of Lot's experience in Sodom (see Genesis 19:4, 5). The old man offered his daughter and the Levite's concubine to them to do with them whatever they pleased. The man and the Levite were willing to allow the defenceless women to be subjected to horrific abuse. Only the concubine is mentioned as being given to the men, the old man's daughter remains safely in the house.

The woman is raped and abused throughout the night. She manages to return to the house but collapses and dies at the threshold. The next morning the Levite finds her body. He returns home with her body and cuts her into 12 pieces which he sends to the 12 tribes. He sought to mobilise the tribes to take action against the perverted men of Gibeah and the Benjamites who supported them.

Chapter 20 The war against Benjamin

When the Levite tells them the story of what has been done the other tribes are outraged at what has been done by the men of Gibeah. They determined to wipe out the tribe of Benjamin and gathered together an army of 400,000 men at Mizpah. They demanded that the Benjamites hand over the guilty men but they refused to do so. The result of this was civil war between Benjamin and all the other tribes. In the first two battles the Benjamites defeated the combined army. The Israelites then began to fast and weep before the Lord. They came to Phinehas the priest to enquire of the Lord at Bethel (where the Ark of the Covenant was at that time). The fact that Phinehas is still the priest helps to date the incidents to the earlier period of the Judges because he was a priest in the time of Joshua (Joshua 22:13).

The Lord promised them victory (28). He used the incident to chasten and humble both sides in the conflict. The fact that He allowed the Israelites victory does not mean that He approved of their conduct following their victory.

The following day the Israelites completely routed the Benjamites, only a remnant of 600 men survived. The Israelites burned their cities and killed everyone and every animal. Archaeologists have found the ruins

of the original Gibeah that show that it was destroyed by fire. Later it was rebuilt and we will find that the first king of Israel, Saul, came from there (1 Samuel 10:26).

Chapter 21 Wives provided for the Benjamites

At this point it looked like that the tribe of Benjamin was destined to die out. They had 600 men but no women left. In the heat of the time the other tribes had taken a rash vow that they would not allow their daughters to marry a Benjamite. Although they had removed the blood guilt from their midst by punishing the men of Gibeah through the deaths of the Benjamites they did not want to see the tribe disappear. They wept before the Lord (v 2, 3). They made offerings to the Lord. They therefore came up with two plans to provide women for the remaining Benjamite men.

Firstly, they made another rash vow that if any they checked if there had been any part of Israel that had not answered the call to arms against Benjamin and gathered for the assembly at Mizpah. If any were found then they would be killed. They discovered that no one from Jabesh Gilead had come from east of the Jordan. An army of 12,000 men was sent to Jabesh Gilead with instructions to kill every male and every female who was not a virgin. Following the slaughter 400 virgins were saved. These were brought to Shiloh. The congregation then sent word to the surviving Benjamite men who were camped at Rimmon. They offered them peace and when they accepted the peace offer they came to Shiloh. The 400 virgins were given to them to be their wives. This left 200 men with no wife. A further scheme was needed.

The second plan was devised to circumvent the vow they had made that they would not give their daughters to the Benjamites as wives. There was to be a festival at Shiloh. The Benjamite men were instructed to lie in wait in nearby vineyards. When the virgin girls came out to dance the men were to seize them and catch a wife for themselves. The men did as they were instructed, seized the girls and returned to the territory of Benjamin to rebuild it.

The book ends with the familiar phrase "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes". They had rejected their Lord and King and these final chapters record the terrible consequences of doing so:

- There was widespread sexual immorality
- There was a corrupt ministry – the Levite was living in sin and Phinehas the High Priest remained silent in the face of the decline of moral and religious observance
- There was a low regard for human life
- Those making decisions did not uphold God's law but made their decisions without consulting Him

No wonder God raised up people to uphold His word and stand against oppression and wickedness.

Questions to discuss

1. Can we relate the events of the final chapters to our day?

2. What might have been said about God if Benjamin had been completely destroyed? What might have been said about His Covenant promises?

3. As we come to the end of the book of Judges does it give us hope or bring us to despair?