

SESSION #15

JUDGES cont.

Let's get back into our study of the Judges.

The structure of the book of Judges is in three parts. An explanatory prologue, chapters 1 & 2, provide a background, a summary statement, of where the book is going.

And then beginning with chapter 3 you get the narrative which is the main section of the book, chapters 3 – 16.

And then there's an epilogue, chapters 17 – 21. That epilogue links up to the preface, they provide bookends to the whole story in the middle, and they relate to one another.

The first 2 chapters give us a preview of what we're going to find in this book. Then Samuel, or whoever, picks out some stories in the main narrative to underline the theme.

Then to really pound home the theme he chooses three stories and puts them into chapters 17 – 21 as an epilogue, but an epilogue that illustrates how bad things have become among the people of God. Those final chapters, which we don't have time to look at in any detail, are in my view the worst chapters you could ever read in the entire Bible. But if you're not familiar with those stories, I would suggest you take a look at them. It's awful stuff from a very tragic point of view. Some of the most gruesome, horrible stories ever told in the annals of human history are put into the last chapters of the book of Judges.

Let's take a look then at the main narrative for a few minutes. Here in the main section of the book we see three things: we see people who served God; there are a few, as there always are in every age, who will serve God faithfully.

Then there are another group of people who succumb to the wave of sin in their society.

And then thirdly, beyond the two contrasting types of people we see over and above all of that a focus on the sovereign God who is always present there in all of these stories, trying to bring His people back to Himself.

The main narrative goes through a bunch of cycles, at least 6 major cycles of servitude, or bondage. The people become slaves in a very real sense, economic slaves, political slaves, social slaves, to the nations among whom they live. And the cycle is the very same every time. For a quick glimpse as to what the elements of that cycle involve, look at chapter 3 and the summary of the first judge.

Let's look at each element in the context of chapter 3 beginning with verse 7. *"The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, they forgot the Lord their God and served the baals and asherahs"* (the false gods and idols of the Canaanites). So here's the beginning of the cycle; it starts out with sin.

Then the cycle moves on to stage 2: *"The Lord's anger burned against them so that he sold them (it's an awful statement) into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim...."* Over and over God will sell His people into slavery, into bondage, into suffering. It's a direct consequence of their sin. God does it for a purpose.

The purpose is realized as you come to stage 3 of the cycle. The Israelites in the midst of that suffering cry out to the Lord. Verse 9: *"And when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel, who delivered them..."* In the first case it's Othniel, Caleb's nephew. And so you have a supplication as the people cry out to the Lord.

And then the Lord answers that prayer by raising up for them a deliverer. And the work of the deliverer results in a period of peace.

Now that cycle goes on and on throughout the book of Judges, time after time. So the characters for whom we know the book of Judges, they arise as God raises them up in answer to the prayers of God's people as they cry out under the cycle of sin and suffering.

And these cycles don't just keep rotating; the problem in the book of Judges is that they keep rotating but at the same time they keep going down, like a whirlpool. Each cycle starts at a lower level so that by the time you get to the ending of the main narrative they are in bad shape indeed.

The people that God raises up to deliver them and to give some peace in the land for various periods of time are not judges in the sense that we would know judges. They're not magistrates with a white wig. These are kind of extraordinary judges or vice-regents, ruling on behalf of God as they move into a period of peace having now conquered the oppressing nation at that given moment.

But they could be called freedom fighters, that's more who they are than what we would call judges. Yes, later on when peace is in the land then they take on a judging kind of magisterial role. But the role for which they are famous is a freedom-fighter kind of guerrilla action to deliver God's people from the oppression of a particular nation.

Twelve specific individuals are named in the book as being these kinds of freedom-fighter magistrates. Six of them are what we might call major judges. Othniel, the man we noted in chapter 3, Caleb's nephew, a prince of the tribe of Judah. He's the first.

Then there's Ehud following right after him, a left-handed man with a phenomenal story. But it's rather a gory story so don't read it just after you've had dinner!

Then there's Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah – a man who made a very rash vow; and Samson. Those are the main six. There are six others who are not as well known. And even with the main six characters you might really recognize only a few.

Perhaps you might know something of Deborah and Barak. Deborah, the only woman in Israel's history who had a major role as a leader of the people, a freedom fighter kind of role. Her name means "honey bee". She linked up with a man by the name of Barak and motivated him to take a position of leadership and to assist her in throwing off the oppression of the Canaanites. And his name Barak means "lightning bolt". I love these two characters. The Honey Bee has a stinger for her enemies but honey for her friends, somebody said. And then she links up with the Lightning Bolt.

So the two of them make a phenomenal combination. And they really are God's combination. Chapters 4 and 5 give us an astonishing set of stories about Deborah and Barak.

Then comes Gideon, more well known than Deborah and Barak, because of his little band of 300 men. This little group defeat the entire Midianite army that are covering the plain just like grasshoppers, thousands and thousands of them. And these 300 men overcome them and put that entire huge military machine to flight. They do so by using the most unusual weapons ever used in military history. If you're not already familiar with Gideon, take a look at his story. A man of great faith and obedience to God. And God did wonderful things through him.

Then perhaps the most famous of all of the judges is of course Samson, the strongest man who ever lived. What I think is very indicative of the situation in the book of Judges is that Samson is the last in the line of the judges in these stories. He's at the bottom of this cyclical whirlpool for the nation.

He's the strongest of them all; he does some incredible feats in order to try and break the bondage of the Philistines, but he is not successful. He's the strongest of them all but he cannot succeed like the others did, because by this time the nation has sunk to such a low level that even the strongest man with the Spirit of God on him from time to time cannot break the power of the Philistines.

He eventually is broken himself, you may remember, when he reveals the secret of his strength, his vow to God as evidenced by the growing of his hair, and his hair is cut off by Delilah (also a famous lady). Then he is broken. They put out his eyes, they bind him, they make him a slave like an oxen. And in that situation he turns back to God again and his hair begins to grow again as an evidence that his heart is now back in relationship with God.

And he does one final feat of strength. He kills more people at his death than he had during his entire lifetime, as he pulls down those pillars in the Philistine temple. But it's basically a very sad story of a man who had some tremendous qualities but some tremendous weaknesses. Like the people of Israel whom he was trying to free.

When you look at the cycles that these people go through, we see some comparison with our present time. Henry Blackaby, in his book *“Fresh Encounter”*, has produced a helpful chart. Let’s just summarize it quickly. The main part of this chart reminds me so much of what happens in the book of Judges.

God’s intention is to pull out of the world a people for Himself. God’s people. And to put them on a pathway to accomplish His purposes in the world. That purpose is to redeem the lost.

The problem is that God’s new redeemed people can go off the track, in our day just as they did in OT times. And when we go off the track then you get into this circle in his chart – the departure from God; and then disciplined by God.

At that point, at the bottom of the cycle, is the crucial moment. We can either cry out to God and turn to Him. Or we can move right off the chart and continue to disobey God and never ever get back into that flow at the top of the chart in the plan of God and being useful in His purposes.

But if we cry out and repent and turn back to God from our sin, God will do for us as He did for the people in the days of the judges: He will restore us, He will free us, He will give us peace and spiritual liberty and bring us back into His purposes to accomplish His goals in the world. So this is not just ancient history we’re talking about in the book of Judges. It’s a cycle that you and I can also get into in the very same way they did by disobeying God and falling into sin. But the way back out is similar as well: a crying out to God and a repentance.

Man’s ingratitude and stubbornness throughout the stories of the book of Judges, because they constantly fall back into sin, is seen in tremendous contrast with God’s patience, as we noted earlier. In fact, the words “Lord God” appear 250 times in the book of Judges, either Lord/Jehovah or God/Adonai. 250 times in 21 chapters! It’s an incredible record of how much God is present in the darkness of Israel’s Dark Ages. They don’t see Him, they don’t want him to be their God, they don’t want to follow Him, but He is always there intervening on their behalf.

Then as you move to that illustrative epilogue in chapters 17 – 21, there are 3 civil war incidents which are recorded for us there, each of them illustrating the results of going away from God. The results that happen to any people when they fall into apostasy. These are described in very graphic, horrible, tragic terms. Tremendous difficulties within the nation of Israel as the direct result of forsaking God who was supposed to be their King. And everyone doing what was right in his own eyes.

Chapter 1 begins with the people of Israel, at least the tribe of Judah, trying to fight – who? – the enemy. That’s where the book begins: Israel fighting the enemy.

The second last chapter gives us the sad story of Israel fighting – who? – one of their own tribes, the tribe of Benjamin. They do such a good job of that particular battle they virtually wipe out that entire tribe, almost entirely kill off one of the 12 tribes of Israel. As a result some extraordinary measures have to be taken to provide wives to preserve that tribe for future generations.

But what an illustration of the trend downward for the people of God in this book! They start off right, fighting the enemy. They end up fighting a brother. It’s what happens in Christian circles too. If we don’t recognize who is our God, and we don’t recognize what is the focus of our spiritual battle – *“we war not against flesh and blood”*, Paul wrote. We don’t fight with one another. Our warfare is against *“principalities and powers in high places”*. But if we lose sight of what that is all about then we, like the people of Israel, can easily end up fighting one another. It’s a very sad commentary on a people who were supposed to be the people of God.

If you’re interested in a more in-depth study of the Book of Judges, see my other series, *“Faith, Failure and a Phenomenal God”*.

Our next session will take us to a beautiful gem gleaming in the dark days of Judges, the book of Ruth.
