

SESSION #14

JUDGES

We now turn to the next book directly following Joshua, the Book of Judges. This book contains incidents from the first approx. 350 years that Israel is in the Promised Land, the land of Canaan. So what happens to them during those 350 years?

First of all, it's a brand new period of their national history which has been called the Theocracy period. Theo – means *God*; cracy – means *rule by*. We have a similar combination when we talk about democracy – rule by the people. Theocracy, rule by God.

This, then, was supposed to be a time during their national history when God, the invisible king, ruled over His people. That becomes extremely important to keep in the back of your mind as we move very quickly into our overview through the times of the judges. It is supposed to be a Theocracy, God is king.

Now, the stories of the book of Judges are fascinating ones indeed, some of the most interesting stories you will find anywhere in the Bible. But they are not intended to be a complete history of what happened during those 350 years. It is just a selection of particular stories out of all those years, probably a selection chosen by Samuel. He is most likely the one who looking back from his time period to their recent history pulls out a sampling of some very significant stories and incidents to help emphasize a particular theme, a theme that God wanted His people to understand as Samuel writes this book. The theme is failure through compromise. The people of Israel during this period compromised badly in terms of how they were supposed to live as the people of God. And that resulted in some tragic failures.

Consequently, these 350 years have been called by many commentators of the Bible, Israel's Dark Ages. And if you know something of those stories in the book of Judges you will recognize that this is a very apt description of those times. They were dark days indeed. Over and over again we see man's constant failure but at the same time we see

God's constant and marvellous mercy. That He would still work with such an intransigent people, such a wicked people over such a long period of time and not just give up on them altogether, indicates something of his wonderful longsuffering and mercy to them.

Let's take a look then at the beginning of the story, chapter 1. The problem of their failure by compromising begins here in chapter 1 and it will be indicated by a phrase that repeats over and over.

Chapter 1 for example verse 19: the men of Judah were unable to drive the people from the plains.

Verse 21: the Benjamites failed to dislodge the Jebusites.

Verse 27: Manasseh did not drive out the people.

Verse 29: nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites.

Verse 30: neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites.

Verse 31: nor did Asher drive out.

Verse 33: neither did Naphtali drive out. So over and over again, in spite of God's command to the people carried forward from the time of Joshua – *"drive out all these wicked evil nations living in the Promised Land"* – they failed to do so.

And as a result the map of the days of the judges looks like this: it's full of "ites" – sores on the face of the Promised Land as these wicked heathen Canaanite nations continued to live in the very places where God wanted His people to live. But they failed to drive them out. That was the beginning of their problems.

The problems only got worse from that point on. They went downward. Chapter 2 verse 2 indicates they began to sign some military leagues or agreements with those people.

Chapter 3 verse 5 tells us the Israelites *"lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons."*

And then the last part of verse 6: *“and served their gods.”* You can see the downward progression as they begin to develop some treaties with these people and then that leads further into intermarriage and that leads to spiritual apostasy.

These nations among whom the Israelites lived, were extremely wicked people. Leviticus chapter 18 gives us the many reasons why God asked His people to drive out, eliminate, even eradicate these nations. We don't have time to look at these but if you're interested in a graphic overview of the morality of those people take a look at Lev. 18.

G. Campbell Morgan said that religious apostasy never begins with intellectual questioning. Where the people of God are by the third chapter of Judges is that they were in apostasy, that is they have gone away from God in their spiritual walk and they are now worshipping idols. They've fallen back from the worship of God.

But Morgan says that kind of religious experience never begins with intellectual questioning; it begins with *“toleration for the things that are out of harmony with the holiness of God”*. These people tolerated things that God would not tolerate. And that was the beginning of this compromising standard for them and their lifestyle and it resulted in due course as it always will in a walking away, a drifting away, a sliding away from God – apostasy.

What a contrast this book is to the last book, the book of Joshua. Joshua is an upward-trending kind of book, progress on page after page. One man, the leader Joshua, is especially prominent and we see great victories in that book as he is faithful to God and the people show themselves to be faithful to God. And God as a result gives them some wonderful victories and freedom.

But when you flip over the page from Joshua to Judges, the trend suddenly turns downward and a very steep decline begins, especially spiritually. There is no one leader prominent in the book of Judges, as there was in Joshua. There are a number of different personalities and characters who are highlighted but no one person dominates, and you see defeat after defeat, page after page, as the people increasingly move away from God and fall into social and military and national bondage.

The key verses for the book of Judges in this downward descent can be found in chapter 2 and verses 18 and 19: *“whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them He was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived, for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers following other gods and serving and worshipping them they refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.”* It’s a synopsis in a nutshell of the entire story of 350 years of the people of God.

Another important phrase which is repeated twice is found at the very end of the book, chapter 21 and verse 25: *“In those days, Israel had no king....”* Who was supposed to be their king? This was a theocracy – *God* was supposed to be their king. But that verse says the absolute reality was that there was *“no king in Israel in those days”*.

It has the earthly kingship, the monarchy of course in view, but beyond that it’s really telling us the truth that God was not their king either. And what is the next phrase? It’s the result when there is no king in a person’s life: *“everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* Everyone did as *he* saw fit.

If you look at verse 1 in the first chapter you see a terrific contrast between the beginning verse of the book and the ending verse of the book. In the first verse the people are described as being a people who ask the Lord, *“What shall we do now?”* That’s how the book starts, they ask God.

But by the time you move into the declining story of the book of Judges, every man is doing what is right in his own eyes. He’s not asking God anymore. The people are not asking God anymore. There is no worship of God left among them.

Let’s bring it up to date. In Christian terms, we are in a period of world history which is called post-modernism. And post-modernists claim, among many things, that morality can be developed by reason, not religion. But this will result in what is called the criminalization of cultures because without objective truth what will happen?

If there is no objective truth then we see the same thing that happened in the book of Judges – *“everyone will do what is right in his own eyes.”* And when everyone in any

given society starts to behave like that, doing what they think is right in their own personal opinion, what's the result socially? It's chaos, it's anarchy. And that is precisely what happens to the people in the days of the judges.

In our own day, the criminalization of cultures is developing at an alarming rate and ethics becomes increasingly situational because there is no standard against which to describe a person's ethics or society's ethics; everybody does what's right in their own eyes, according to their own view. And the collective view, then, the majority view becomes what is the morality or the ethics of that society.

But if there's no objective truth that is going to create a downward kind of situation ending in the criminalization of cultures. Dr. Jun Vencer, former international director of the World Evangelical Fellowship, said, *"Without an absolute norm of right and wrong, it will be difficult to decide on disputes..."* Of course, it will. If you don't have a right and a wrong how do you decide when there are disputes between people or between societies? And then he says, *"and the future will be in the hands of a revolutionary or in the hands of lawyers."*

As the famous Russian author Solzhenitsyn observed, *"It is a terrible thing to live in a society (such as the former USSR) where there is no law; it is also a terrible thing to live in a society (such as the USA) where there are only lawyers."* What he says with kind of tongue in cheek has a terrific, tragic overtone to it. America has more lawyers per capita than any place on the face of this planet. And it is not turning out to be a good thing; situational ethics has led to the criminalization of their culture. By the year 2000 the USA had two million inmates in the prison system. With only 4.28% of the world's population, the USA has 25% of its prisoners (NBC "Dateline with Lester Holt"; "Meek Mill" May 6, 2018). It's not the kind of society to emulate, at least in these terms.

But here in the Book of Judges, we see an OT example of what happens when a people as a society get de-linked from absolute truth and begin to walk away from God.

We will complete our study of the Book of Judges in the next session.
