

What's the Message – Lesson 45

We continue our study of the book of Judges with a look into the six most prominent judges.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray today that the Lord would use this study to teach us the same lesson He had been trying to teach Israel: to be faithful to the one and only true God, and obey Him above all others. Amen.

Last time we saw an overview of this book and that it emphasizes the failures of the Israelites, and how they repeatedly turned away from God and participated in the pagan worship of the Canaanite god, Baal.

We need to remember that at this time, Israel had no central ruling authority as they did with Moses and Joshua, but had become an autonomous group of tribes, a very loose federation – all officially under the rule of Yahweh. We also need to remember that they had not completely cleaned out the nations as God had commanded, and that pockets of Baal worshippers remained around them. Over time these once small pockets of pagans regained their physical strength and attacked a segment of the Israelite federation that had grown lackadaisical and careless. Not all at once, but one group over here today, and another over there in a few years. And so it went. But Israel had no central approach to counter this activity, and it was each tribe for itself.

We see in chapter three a pattern that was repeated throughout this entire period. The first example is the king of Mesopotamia, who made a portion of Israel serve him for eight years. We read, starting with verse nine: *But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer . . . Othniel. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave (the king of Mesopotamia) into his hand.*

So the land had rest 40 years. Then Othniel died. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel. And the pattern repeats, and they served Eglon 18 years. This time the deliverer was

a left-handed man named Ehud, who used some cunning to kill Eglon. In the battle that followed, Israelites from the hill country were victorious, and the land had rest for 80 years.

In chapter 4 we read: *And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan. Then the people of Israel cried to the Lord for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.*

Now comes an interesting story of the only woman recorded to be a judge in Israel. Her name was Deborah, and she instructed a man named Barak to take the men he had gathered and attack the Canaanites with all their chariots. And the Lord sent a heavy rain that made the chariots useless, and Israel was victorious. Chapter 5 gives us The Song of Deborah, which presents all this in poetic form.

And the land had rest for 40 years. Then Israel fell back into their evil ways, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian for seven years. And chapters six through eight give us the more familiar story of Gideon, and how he selected only 300 men to come upon the Midianites suddenly at night and throw them into a panic. After Gideon's victory, Israel wanted to make him king, but verse 23 of chapter eight gives us this key statement: *Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you."* And this divergent attitude regarding how Israel should be governed persisted throughout this period of time. Some were for a central government; some were opposed.

But after Gideon, the people of Israel reverted to their worship of the idols of the Ammonites and others, and they were oppressed by the Ammonites for 18 more years. This time when they cried for help, God sent Jephthah – previously an outcast – to lead the fight. And again, Israel was victorious, and Jephthah judged Israel for six years.

Chapter 13 begins by telling us that Israel relapsed into its evil ways, and the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for 40 years. Then begins the story of the best known judge of them all: Sampson, a Nazirite from birth. The details of all his encounters with the Philistines may not be familiar to all our listeners, such as when he burned their fields, or killed

many with the jawbone of a donkey, but surely most have heard something about the episode with Delilah.

After several failed attempts to find the secret of Sampson's strength, he finally admitted that as a Nazirite his hair had never been cut. So while Sampson slept, she had his head shaved, and the Philistines were able to capture him, gouge his eyes out, and put him in prison. And we read in chapter 16, verse 23: *Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and to rejoice; for they said, "our god has given Sampson our enemy into our hand."* Thousands of Philistines had gathered in a building and Sampson was put on exhibition before the people. And Sampson prayed to Yahweh that his strength would be restored this once, and he pushed against the central pillars and literally brought the house down.

Verse 30 tells us: *So the dead whom he slew at his death were more than those whom he had slain during his life.* And with that, Teacher, we have surveyed the prominent judges revealed to us. Other than some interesting stories, and maybe some inspiration of courage, I must ask my usual question: what's the message for us?

Moses and Joshua had warned the Israelites that they must be true to God, and not try to mix with the pagans around them. In Joshua chapter 23 we read: *these nations shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge on your sides, and thorns in your eyes.* All of your examples have the same message and point of focus. Israel could not bow down to both Yahweh and Baal. It must be one or the other. To practice tolerance in some things could be acceptable, but not in this. Such faithlessness called for God's judgment, and it was sure to come. And it most certainly did come.

Yet God is also a loving and forgiving God, and when Israel repented and cried out for help, He delivered them from oppression through these judges. Does it work the same way today? Absolutely. We cannot be tolerant of sin any more than Israel could. And we cannot live our lives as if Sunday mornings were something separate that did not carry over to the rest of the week. God demands that we be faithful and obey Him foremost throughout all of our life.

Next time we will wrap up our study of Judges with a story of chaos.