

History: JUDGES

INTRODUCTION

The book of Judges covers a long span in Israel's history, from about 1375 to 1100 BC.ⁱ At the beginning of the book, just after Joshua's death, the Israelites failed to fully drive out the pagan nations from the land as God had commanded (Judges 1:27-2:3). As a result of their disobedience, the Israelites were corrupted by the influence of the pagans (who lived in the land) and started worshiping their false gods. This began a repeated cycle: the Israelites would turn away from God; God would allow them to be defeated and ruled over by their enemies; the people would repent and cry out to God for help; God would raise up a judge and deliver them; and then they would soon stop following God and go back to doing whatever they wanted. This cycle continued for a dozen generations until the rise of Samuel and King Saul.

Throughout the book of Judges, the people of Israel turn to God only when they want something from Him and don't honor and obey Him as they ought. Nevertheless, God demonstrates His faithful love to help and discipline them even when they are constantly unfaithful to Him. This book shows the human heart's tendency to drift from God, and His character, compassion, and pity to save them even when they least deserve it.

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Is there something that someone—perhaps a parent, spouse, roommate or friend—must repeatedly ask you to do (or not do) because you are constantly forgetting what they asked? Whether it is taking out the trash, cleaning a room, or turning off the lights when you leave the house, there are some things that just seem to go in one ear and out the other. In Israel's case, God constantly called them to turn away from their idols and follow Him. But time and time again they ignored Him and did what they wanted to do, only turning to God when they needed His help. To us, this repeated tendency can become annoying or frustrating. But throughout it all, we see God's forbearance and patience with them even when they never learn from their mistakes.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

Judges: FAILURE

Decline Before The Judges (Chapters 1-2)

Deliverance Through The Judges (Chapters 3-16)

Depravity After The Judges (Chapters 17-21)

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The book of Judges centers on Israel's wandering away from God and God's faithfulness and compassion despite their waywardness. He saved them time and time again, not because of their own merit, who they are, or their repentance, but because of His own compassion and mercy. Just like the Israelites, we "have all fallen away; together [we] have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (Psalm 53:3). We all deserve death because of our unfaithfulness to God and His commandments, but God sent Christ to take on the consequence of our sins, not because of anything we have done, but because of His richness in mercy (Ephesians 2:4-5). He saved us when we were enemies to Him and dead in our trespasses against Him.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF JUDGES

OBSERVATION

- Look for repetition, both of specific phrases ("did evil in the eyes of the Lord"; "everyone did what was right in his own eyes") and of the pattern of Israel's rebellion, defeat, repentance, and rescue.
- Note how the judges themselves were imperfect people, but God still worked through them to accomplish His purposes.

INTERPRETATION

- Literary Context: Judges is a history book that was written for the people of Israel.

- Historical Context: The Israelites at this time lived without a king or government, which is why “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” It was a bit like the wild west or frontier days in our own country’s history.
- Cultural Context: With no king and with everyone doing what seemed right in their own eyes, the people of Israel were often not united as a nation, to the point that the individual tribes sometimes went to war against each other.ⁱⁱ

APPLICATION

- Is there a sin habit that you keep returning to even though God keeps trying to warn you and discipline you out of it? What are the potential consequences if you continue repeating that sin? How can you repent and turn away from your sin?
- What are some ways in your own life or in our culture that people do what is right in their own eyes? What is the outcome of that?
- How have you seen God repeatedly forgive and rescue you from your own sins?
- Though we fail continually, what does it look like to rest in the finished work of Jesus?

PRAYER

- Pray that God would give you the strength to resist temptation and to crucify the old self, be transformed in the renewing of your mind, and put on the new self (Ephesians 4:22-24).
- Give thanks to God for who He is instead of focusing foremost on what you would like Him to do for you.
- Pray for all those who do not know God and who are living in the way that they think is best. Pray for opportunities to share the truth of the gospel with them.

CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS THE CHURCH SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF JUDGES?

“The book of Judges shows us that the Bible is not a ‘Book of Virtues’; it is not full of inspirational stories. Why? Because the Bible (unlike the books on which other religions are based) is not about following moral examples. It is about a God of mercy and long-suffering, who continually works in and through us despite our constant resistance to his purposes. God relentlessly offers his grace to people who do not deserve it, or seek it, or even appreciate it after they have been saved by it. Ultimately, there is only one hero in this book, and he’s divine.” – Timothy Keller,ⁱⁱⁱ 2013

“God does not forsake us, but we are prone to forsake Him. What provoked the forsaking of God during the period of the judges was the Israelites’ great desire to be like their neighbors. God had called them to nonconformity. God had called them to be a holy nation. God had called them to be godly and to flee from idolatry, but that was unpopular in those days. It’s often been unpopular in church history. And without a doubt, it’s unpopular today as well.” – R.C. Sproul,^{iv} 2016

ⁱ <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-judges/>

ⁱⁱ <https://insight.org/resources/bible/the-historical-books/judges>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thegoodbook.com/blog/usefulresources/2013/08/06/introducing-judges-for-you/>

^{iv} <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/learning-judges>

