

Meet the Judges *(The Book of Judges)*

Introduction

Judges was a time of heroes, of daring rescues and mighty warriors, of merciless enemies and epic battles; a time of fear, a time of revenge, a time when every man did what was right in his own eyes. Or that's how the movie trailer would go. The book of Judges is certainly a dark and gruesome part of the Bible, in which Israel lurches from sin to judgement to salvation and back again with grim regularity. Yet it contains strong warnings and encouragements for us as Christians today.

God made promise to Abram (who he would later rename Abraham)...

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt after 400 years of slavery. This was followed by 40 years in the wilderness to prepare them to enter the land promised to Abraham, a land "flowing with milk and honey". God gave them the Law which was intended to give them a framework to enable them to live as the People of God.

Deuteronomy means 'second law'. Forty years after Moses had received the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), he reissued them (Deuteronomy 5) to make sure God's people understood what it meant to have God dwelling with them. The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land should have taken a matter of weeks but due to their disobedience they wandered for forty years and the generation that escaped Egypt died out before reaching their destination.

Joshua was commissioned by Moses to be "strong and courageous" and to lead the people into the Promised Land. Under Joshua's faithful leadership, and the command to "be careful to obey all that is written in the

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Law”, the Israelites were finally ready to enter the Promised Land. They fought battles and the Lord gave them victories and territory, and they inherited what God had promised to Abraham many centuries before. They became a great nation under God’s guidance and were blessed with a good and fertile land to live in. However, as we will see in the book of Judges, Israel demonstrated half-hearted obedience. As a result, they were unable to completely conquer the lands they have been promised and their compromise led to significant problems as we will see over the coming weeks.

We will explore six of the twelve judges:

1. Othniel: A model Judge?
2. Ehud: The unexpected leader
3. Deborah: The unlikely leader
4. Gideon: The reluctant leader
5. Jephthah: The regretful leader
6. Samson Hero or Zero?

The encounter the following repeating cycle of the Judges:

1. The people forget God

The cycle starts when the people of God forget him.

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. (Judges 3:7)

They forgot the Lord! It’s not forgetting that God exists, rather forgetting what God is like, forgetting what he has done through creation, forgetting what he has done through the history of the world and through our lives and the lives of our ancestors.

Forgetting God leads to rebelling against God. The God of the bible was radically different to the other gods. Apart from the obvious point that that he was the only true living God, he was (and is) unwilling to share his glory

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with the false gods. The other gods were thought to be happy to co-exist with other pagan gods and each had their areas of special interest – be that agriculture, power, prosperity, nature, fertility etc. But not Yahwah, the God of Israel, he is a jealous God (Exodus 34:14) he expects our loyalty. He is sovereign over everything and all things are created by him.

2. God becomes angry

The anger of the Lord burned against Israel. (Judges 3:8)

God's just response was to give them over to their enemies. He doesn't just turn his back on them, rather he takes an active part in their downfall. If that sounds harsh don't miss the irony. The Lord gave them what they wanted. They had chosen to worship the false gods of the nations that surrounded them, so he said, 'ok, have it your way', go live with them, and they became captives of these nations, in this case for eight years.

We too are living in a culture that's full of false idols including power, prosperity, sex, celebrity, etc. None of these things are bad in themselves, until we make them into idols, by putting them higher in our lives than God, and allowing them to enslave us. Then they become sin to us because these false idols have caused us to become separated from the one true God and enslaved by our sin. We can become powerless to find our own way out of it.

3. The people cry out to God

They cried out to the Lord (Judges 3:9)

Sin is turning away from God and repentance is turning back to God. The people repented – they remembered God, they cried out to him and in doing so turned back to him.

4. God responds by raising up a judge to deliver them

But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer. (Judges 3:9)

The Lord saw their distress and relented; the Lord rescued them by raising up a judge.

Othniel wasn't chosen by a democratic election or by a council of the great and the good. Rather he was appointed by God himself. The Lord is

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sovereign in equipping and empowering leaders who bring about his rescue of his people.

*The Spirit of the Lord came on him, so that he became Israel's judge.
(Judges 3:10)*

Not only was Othniel appointed by God, he was also equipped by God to do his appointed work by the power of the Holy Spirit.

He didn't go into battle in his own strength. And notice that the Lord did the rescuing. Othniel was fully reliant on God and served God, He didn't seek any glory for himself.

5. The people receive a blessing

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Othniel defeated the enemy so that the land, and hence the nation had peace for forty years until Othniel died.

The Lord's ultimate goal was that his people would have peace. What was lost in the Garden of Eden at the fall of humanity was peace: peace between God and God's people; peace between God's people; and peace within each individual person.

God promised Abraham a nation and a land in which it could live in peace if they lived in obedience to the Lord. At the time of the Judges, the people had taken the land but had no peace because of their rebellion against God and their pursuit of idols.

This peace relied on a judge who could put right what was wrong.