

Judges 1:1-3:6

Introducing “Judges”

1. Despite the best efforts of many good people, the world is still full of corruption, crime, conflict, exploitation, evil and suffering. What conclusions do people commonly draw from this? What explanations are commonly given?

The book of Judges deals with the period of Israel’s history “after the death of Joshua” (1:1) and before the birth of Samuel who would ultimately anoint the first king of Israel. The “judges” are not so much legal judges, but a series of individuals whom God raised up to rescue and lead his people. The book has a clear structure:

1:1-3:6	Introduction (in 2 parts)
3:7-16:31	The Judges
17-21	Epilogue (in 2 parts)

Judges describes and explains the failure of Israel to fully occupy and enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land. By the end of the book, despite the faithfulness of God, Israel descends into spiritual and moral chaos.

2. The book opens with Israel’s task to complete the conquest of the Promised Land (“Canaan”), which had already been allocated to them in Joshua 13-21. This involved the complete destruction of the ‘Canaanites’ who inhabited the land. To us this seems like an evil genocide. Read these passages and see what God was doing and why - Genesis 15:13-16, Deuteronomy 7:1-6 & 9:4-5.
3. The introduction to the book comes in 2 parts. Read the first part in 1:1-2:5.
 - a. How does reading this leave you feeling? What overall impression is given?
 - b. Why did the people fail to fully conquer the land? Had God let them down?
 - c. What ominous signs or trends can you see here?
4. Now read the second part of the introduction in 2:6-3:6. Here we are given a summary of the whole period of the judges, with further explanation for what happened.
 - a. Where did the generation after Joshua go wrong? Why did they fail to conquer the land?
 - b. As time went on, what ‘cycle’ of events developed?
 - c. What path did Israel choose instead of obedience to God?
5. What do we learn from the two fold introduction to Judges about God and about human failure to obey him?
6. How does this part of the Bible help us to better understand and appreciate Jesus and the new covenant? See Hebrews 8:7-13.
7. What lessons might we learn from Judges 1 & 2 about living as God’s people in the midst of the nations of the world? (See also 1 John 2:15-17 & James 4:1-10).

Judges 3:7-31

Othniel, Ehud & Shamgah

1. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. In his time Jesus seemed weak, foolish and even offensive. In what ways is this still true in our time?
2. In 3:7 we come to the main central section of the book (3:7-16:31), which presents accounts of the various judges. (Note that just as chapter 1 described the military progress of the tribes beginning with Judah and Benjamin, here again the order of judges begins with those from Judah and Benjamin.) Read 3:7-11 and also the background in 1:12-15.
 - a. In what ways does Othniel seem to be an ideal choice to judge (rescue and lead) God's people?
 - b. What is the sequence of events here? Is there anything negative said about Othniel and his time?
 - c. Who is the real saviour? (v 15)
3. Now read 3:12-30 about the next judge – Ehud.
 - a. What is the sequence of events here? How is it similar or different to the sequence in v 7-11?
 - b. What features of the account are emphasized? Do you think it is meant to be comedic? What effect does the way this story is told have on us as readers, and on how Ehud is portrayed? (If Othniel is a 'noble warrior', how would you describe Ehud?)
 - c. Who is the real saviour here? (v 28)
4. Now read about Shamgah in verse 31. What kind of man does Shamgah seem to be? (Notice that we aren't told anything about his tribal background – perhaps he is not even an Israelite??)
5. These judges are clearly flawed and 'unusual', yet they also foreshadow God's the ultimate saviour and ruler – Jesus. In what ways is Jesus similar or different to these early judges?
6. How does reflecting on the fact that God used these flawed and unusual men to accomplish his purposes help...
 - a. To strengthen our faith in Jesus?
 - b. To encourage us when we feel weak or weird?
 - c. To view others who might not seem to be likely servants of God?

Judges 4 & 5

Deborah & Barak

1. Read Revelation 19:1-5. How do you feel about those passages of the Bible where there is rejoicing over the destruction of God's enemies, and of the enemies of his people? Can you see yourself joining in the celebration? Why or why not?
2. Read Judges 4:1-16.
 - a. What is unusual about Deborah as a judge, and her calling on Barak?
 - b. How do you think Barak would have felt to be summonsed to go and fight against Sisera? (cf 1:19)?
 - c. How does Barak's response in verse 8 make you feel? What is wrong with this?
 - d. Barak is held up as a model of faith in Hebrews 11:32. Despite his mistake, what did he do that was right?
 - e. Up till verse 16, in what ways does God's word prove to be reliable?
3. In what ways, like Barak, might we be tempted to try and manipulate God, or put conditions on our obedience? How does this passage encourage us to trust his word?
4. Now read Judges 4:17-23.
 - a. What is surprising about what Jael does? Did you "see it coming"?
 - b. In what ways is Jael, and what she does, similar or different to that of the previous judges?
 - c. In what way is she/it similar or different to Jesus? (ie. How was Jesus surprising for the people of the time?)
5. Why do you think God seems to work in such surprising ways?
6. In chapter 5 Deborah and Barak sing a "duet" in response to what God did. Read chapter 5.
 - a. What are the main themes of the song?
 - b. How is God described?
 - c. Some people find the rejoicing and prayer of verses 24-31 hard to accept.
 - i. Do you think we are meant to approve or disapprove of the content and tone of the song? Why?
 - ii. How does this challenge us to think differently about God's judgment on his enemies?
 - iii. How does verse 31 help us to understand and appreciate the cross of Christ?
7. Pray together about what you have learnt about God, about yourself and about his plan of salvation in Jesus.

Judges 6-8:28

Gideon

1. What particular temptations do you think would come to people who experience worldly success (eg. a minister whose church grows, someone who excels at sport, someone who grows rich or powerful)?

Gideon is humble before God at the start of this section, but as he experiences success under God's hand, he begins to take matters into his own hands, and the people also increasingly seem look to Gideon rather than God. We will read the whole section bit by bit, reflecting on this development as we go.

2. Read Judges 6

- a. When the angel first comes to Gideon (v 11-24), what impression do we have of Gideon? How accurate is the description of him as "mighty warrior" in v 12?
- b. God's first instruction to Gideon is in verse 25. What do you think about the way Gideon went about it? Can we attribute success to him?
- c. What do you make of Gideon's requests of God regarding the fleece? Do you think this is a good model for seeking guidance today? Why or why not?

3. By the end of chapter 6, Gideon has been raised up, Baal has been dethroned and both Israel and the Midianites have gathered for battle. Now read 7:1-8:3.

- a. Why did God reduce Gideon's numbers so drastically?
- b. How would you have felt if you were one of the 350 soldiers with Gideon? How did God boost Gideon's confidence?
- c. When the battle finally comes to what extent is Gideon responsible for the victory (v 16-21), and what role does God play (v 22)?
- d. To what extent does Gideon now seem to be a "mighty warrior"?

4. Now read Judges 8:4-28.

- a. How would you describe Gideon in his dealings with the men of Succoth and Peniel, and with the 2 Midianite princes? What was really driving him now (see v 19)? Where is God in these events?
- b. What reason does Israel give for wanting Gideon to rule them? What is the final result of Gideon's success?

5. In what ways did Gideon's success corrupt him, and the people? If we were to make the same mistake, what might that look like in our lives? What steps might we take to avoid these outcomes?

Judges 8:29-9:57

Abimelech

1. Galatians 6:7 - "Don't be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows he will also reap". To what extent have you seen this principle working out in your own or other people's lives?

2. After Gideon's death there is a new threat to Israel's life in the land. This time it is not from a foreign power, but from the direct consequences of the people's own sin.
 - a. Read Judges 8:29-35. What has been sowed here that looks like it could reap bad consequences?

 - b. Read Judges 9:1-6. How does Abimelech come to power? What further evil seeds are sown?

 - c. Read Judges 9:7-21. Have the 'lords of Shechem' (the Cedars of Lebanon) acted faithfully in making Abimelech (the brambles) king (v 16)? What curse is given against each in verse 20?

 - d. (If time permits). How do the background associations of Shechem and Mount Gerazim bring into focus the seriousness of what is happening here? What is at stake?
 1. Shechem – Joshua 24 (see v 1, 14 & 19-28).
 2. Mount Gerazim – Deuteronomy 27:11-13

 - e. Read Judges 9:22-57. How was Jotham's curse fulfilled for the lords of Shechem and for Abimelech? Who is ultimately in control of this (v 23 & 56)?

3. In what specific ways can you see that God "turned back" the evil Abimelech and others did onto them (v 56)? (eg. see v 4 & 46-49; v25 & 43; v 5,18 & 53).

4. Verses 23 & 56 indicate that God is behind the unfolding of all this. What does this teach us about God? Is there any sense in which you see God's mercy to Israel?

5. How should the certainty of God's judgement on his enemies (the ultimate reaping of what we sow) affect our response to the evil we see around us?

Judges 9-12 Jephthah

1. Sometimes people say things they later regret. Can you think of famous examples from history, or of promises or statements you yourself have made and later regretted?

Jephthah is the main judge in the next section of the book. As we will see he had the ability to speak well, but his foolish words also brought tragic results. As in prior studies we will work through the section bit by bit.

2. Read Judges 10:1-18.
 - a. From verses 1-6, what is familiar and what is new or different in the pattern of Israel's sin and God's response?
 - b. Does Israel's repentance seem genuine to you? Why or Why not? (What might they have been trying to accomplish by repenting?)
 - c. Will God raise up a judge to rescue them?
3. Read Judges 11:1-28.
 - a. In what way does the way Israel treats Jephthah reflect the way they treat God?
 - b. As you read this passage do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about Jephthah as a judge? Why? What seems to be his main motivation?
 - c. What indication is there about how God sees him?
4. Now read Judges 11:29-40. Why do you think Jephthah makes his vow? (What do you think he is trying to accomplish? Could it be similar to Israel's repentance in 10:15-16?)
5. Now read the final section in Judges 12:1-15. Compare verses 1-6 with how Gideon handles the Ephraimites in 8:1-3, and the two outcomes.
6. How do you feel after reading the story of Jephthah? In what ways do you see the continuing downward spiral in the book of Judges?
7. What do we learn here about God and about Israel? How does this help us to better understand or appreciate God's salvation for us in Jesus?
8. There is surely a warning to us from the way Jephthah's words bring such tragic outcomes (both his vow and his reply to the men of Ephraim). What do Romans 10:9-13 and James 3:1-12 say about the right way for us to use our tongues?

Judges 13-16

Samson

1. Samson is a famous character. For what is he remembered? Why do you think he is so memorable?
2. Read Judges 13.
 - a. In verse 1 we see start of the familiar cycle in Judges. What is different this time round? What does this tell us about God?
 - b. Considering the background of Numbers 6:1-8, and all that happens in this chapter, what expectations might a first time reader have about this child?
 - c. In what ways is Samson's birth similar or different to Jesus? (see Luke 1:26-38)
3. Read Judges 14 & 15. What kind of man is Samson? What do Samson's life and the way the people of Judah treat him reveal about the state of Israel's relationship with God? What is God's role in these events?
4. Now read chapter 16.
 - a. What does Samson's continual pursuit of Philistine women show us about his regard for the Lord and for his God-given role?
 - b. How is Samson's capture explained by...
 - i. A humanistic reading of the story?
 - ii. The Philistines (v 21-24)?
 - iii. The author of Judges (the narrator)?
5. What does Samson achieve in his death? In what ways is his life and death similar or different to Jesus' death?
6. Samson's hair was sign of being a "Nazarite to God". Without it he says he would be "like any other man". In a sense his whole life of desiring and becoming subject to foreign women is a sign that he preferred to be "like any other man", rather than fulfilling his calling to God. How might a desire to be "like any other person" look in your life? How can we avoid the mistakes of Sampson?
7. In what ways is Sampson a hero of faith (Hebrews 11:32)?
8. What would be good to pray as a result of hearing God's word from this section?

Judges 17-18

Religious Rebellion

1. In what ways do people in our world think that religious artefacts, associations and rituals will secure God's favour so that life goes well for them?
2. After the accounts of the 12 judges in chapters 3-16, we have now arrived at the first section of the 2-part Epilogue to the book – showing the religious and moral chaos of the nation at this time. Chapters 17-18 deal primarily with the religious chaos.

Read Judges 17.

- a. What kind of man is Micah? List the problems you can see in his religion. (See also Deuteronomy 12:1-14)
- b. What is Micah trying to achieve in setting up his shrine with his priest?
- c. In light of the book as a whole, what do you think verse 6 means? What do you think the narrator thinks would have made the difference?

3. Now read Judges 18.

- a. Why were the Danites on the move? (See v 1 and also Judges 1:34). List the problems you can see in their morality and religion. Where is their confidence found?
- b. Why does the Levite go with the Danites? (ie. What seems to be his main motivation?)
- c. To what extent did the idols & priest help things go well for Micah? What does he have left at the end?
- d. It seems from verse 30 that the Danite shrine stood for centuries. Read 2 Kings 17:6-20. On the national level, where did idolatry and false religion lead?

4. Why do you think people (eg. Israel) are constantly attracted to idolatry and self-made religion?

5. In what ways do you think we Christians are tempted by idolatry and self-made religion today? What idols are particularly appealing to us? (See also Ephesians 5:5)

6. What do these chapters tell us about the character of God's people at this time? How does reading this give us a greater appreciation of Jesus and his kingdom?

Judges 19-21

No king in Israel

1. Most people like to read a “happy ending” at the end of a story – or at least to find a resolution to the tensions in the story line. Given all you’ve seen so far in this book – what might a happy ending look like for Judges?

In this final study we come to second part of the two-part epilogue to the book of Judges. Sadly, it is not a happy ending. .

2. Read Judges 19. How would you describe the situation of God’s people at this time? What is your opinion of the Levite by the end (see esp v 25-29)? Why?

(If you have time, read Genesis 19:1-13. What do you think we’re meant to conclude from seeing the similarities?)

3. Read Judges 20.

- a. How do you feel at the end of reading this chapter?

- b. Compare 20:18 with 1:1-2. What is different now?

- c. Why do you think Israel was defeated the first 2 times, even after “enquiring” of the Lord? (Do you think their enquiry was genuine and ‘from the heart’, or more of a ‘going through the motions’?)

4. Now read Judges 21.

- a. The future of the tribe of Benjamin is under threat. What are, and what do you think of, the three strategies for finding wives for the remaining men?

- b. While content to kill and catch wives, what is Israel most concerned to avoid? (Which judge does this remind you of?)

5. The closing verse of the book has been variously repeated through-out the epilogue (17:6, 18:1, 19:1 & 21:25). What do you think it means? (eg. Perhaps that Israel’s problems existed even before they had a king? Or that if they had a king things would have been different? Or perhaps that they did have a king (God), but they didn’t submit to him?)

6. In the book of Judges we have seen how God raises up one saviour after another, yet the people seem to have become more and more sinful. What does the sad ending to the book imply? How would you summarise the main message(s) of the book as a whole?

7. How have you personally benefited from reading the book of Judges? How has it changed your view of God, of humanity (including yourself) and of Jesus?