

Judges

1:1-26

Right from the beginning of the book of Judges, we get the impression that all is not well and that the conquest, begun under Joshua, had not gone as well as anticipated. We will learn why this happened later (2:1-5).

But for now, we learn that Joshua had died and that the people had not yet possessed all their possessions. They

had not been diligent in the fight against the enemy. They had not put the enemy to death but only disabled him (1:6). They had not followed through to possess after victory and were satisfied to live in the "lowlands" (1:9). They had come to depend on their own strength and had made themselves equal with the enemy (1:19).

1:27-36

Failure in dealing with the enemy (with sin and temptation) may not appear so bad at the beginning. We may even be able to use sin to our advantage, in "forced labour," but it can never work, and we will pay heavily for it (the record of Judges will show us).

2:1-5

The previous chapter presented the facts of the situation without commentary. Here we are told why the Israelites did not drive out the Canaanites...because of disobedience. Remorse and weeping (2:4-5) do not always indicate true or sustained repentance, as the rest of the book will show us.

2:6-10

These few verses really mark the beginning of the period of the judges, after the death of Joshua. Throughout the Church's history, the life and dynamics of the Church often mirror those of a particular leader. Our spiritual life and the life of the local church must not be measured by the life of a dynamic leader but are

derived from and lean on the Saviour himself. Joshua is dead, and the people fall away!!

2:11-15

The seeds of unfaithfulness are sown years before we reap the harvest. The problems seen during the judges' period were the fruits of previous failures. They had already begun to "abandon the Lord" (Vs. 13) during Joshua's time by not completing the conquest; now they will complete their rebellion and serve the gods of the people around them. The hand of the Lord is against those who abandon the Lord.

2:16-3:6

God has secured safety for his Church. In this section, the author

introduces us to the repeated sin-cycle of the period of the judges: sin, suffering, supplication, saviours (judges), and salvation. All of this was because they did not lean on the Lord to drive the nations out under Joshua. The Lord leaves us with the consequences of our sin as a reminder that we have failed in the past, in our own strength, and we need to trust our lives completely to him (2:20-23). Also, the Lord puts adverse circumstances in our way to teach us the art of spiritual warfare (3:1-2).

3:7-11

We come now to the first judge, Othniel, the younger brother of Caleb. Othniel was an older man at this point. He had crossed the Jordan

with Israel and had learned war, already distinguishing himself (Joshua 15:16-17). But Othniel seeks to maintain the old paths (Joshua 24:15; see also Jeremiah 6:16). It is never too late to serve the Lord; we should not drift aimlessly into the grave. While perhaps retired from "ministry", we can often do a greater service in old age through encouragement, influence, visiting, writing, and praying.

3:12-30

The second sin-cycle and another enemy rises; Moab under the leadership of the fat king Eglon. Answering the cry of his people, the Lord raised up Ehud. The secret to Ehud's success was his ability to plan and execute his attack without

publicity or fanfare. He had a "message from God" (3:20), and it needed to be delivered privately (3:19). The details of this act of courage are recorded for us, no doubt to show us the wisdom of Ehud's strategy, his stealth and his courage in the defence of the Lord's people. We need courage and swift action like Ehud to put the Sword of the Lord through our sins, our temptations, our wandering thoughts, and bring us back continually to live in the holiness of God.

3:31

Shamgar appears in only a few lines of the history of Israel's valiant men. Shamgar did two notable things. First, he killed 600 Philistines with an ox goad (a simple stick), either at one

time or over his lifetime. We might not have much in our lives or in our ministry, but the Lord can use what we have to his glory. He can make much out of little. Second, Shamgar "also saved Israel." Killing the Philistine was not to satisfy his bloodthirsty hatred for the Philistines; it was for the sake of the Lord's people. Let us live, not for our own ambitions, but for the good of the Church of Christ.

4:1-24

The third sin-cycle, and we are beginning to see a pattern. Despite their habit of sinning, the Lord preserves his people, and he will accomplish his purpose through them (and us). Here, Deborah and Jael come to the fore, and we should be

thankful for the women in our lives who have influenced, encouraged, and strengthened us in the fight — our mothers, our wives, or women in our congregations.

5:1-31

Singing was a big part of Israel's life. They sang for joy, they sang laments in times of sorrow and affliction, they sang at weddings, at funerals and at harvest times. Here, Deborah takes up a song of praise to God for deliverance. Notice how much of her song is grounded in facts, not in sentiment or aspirations, or what she thinks about God. It recounts history to celebrate God's work in time on behalf of his people (e.g., verses 3-4).

6:1-10

Here, the author offers a brief insight into the enemy's pervasiveness.

Rather than a full-frontal attack, the Midianites eat them up like a cancer, devouring their crops, stealing their livestock (verse 4) and bringing them very low (verse 6). It is difficult to deal with sin when it permeates so many aspects of our lives. But we must deal with it, and these verses set the scene for the ministry of Gideon.

6:11-27

Gideon was a very fearful man. When the Lord called him, he was under a tree hiding from the Midianites (vs. 11). He pulled down the altars of Baal under cover of darkness, because he was afraid of his family (vs. 27). To confirm the calling of the

Lord, the angel of the Lord graciously demonstrated his power (vs. 21) and would again later in the story (vss. 36-40). It was this that instilled peace in the heart of God's servant, and he could raise an altar called Jehovah-Shalom; the Lord Is Peace (vs. 24). This is what God does for his servants, this is our Master, Jehovah-Shalom!

6:28-35

Gideon's first task was to destroy the altars in his hometown. This was a test, not just for himself, but for his family and his fellow citizens. The lesson learned was that Baal could not contend for himself (vs. 32); he was an impotent god. Gideon had proven himself faithful, and he was, therefore, clothed with the Spirit of

the Lord. The Lord had prepared him for a greater task — to blow the trumpet against the Midianites. Let us trust God and prove him faithful, and we will be led into greater works for the Lord.

7:1-18

Gideon, who has been doubtful and lacking assurance, is now going to see the Lord work with a reduced number of men, so that God gets the glory and not the Israelites (vs. 2). The Lord has graciously accommodated Gideon's doubts and fears and will continue to do so (vss. 10-18). But notice also that when God reduced the number of soldiers in Gideon's army, he kept the best—those who were courageous (vs. 3) and alert and ready for battle (vs. 7). The Lord will

use the few. Still, he expects those few to be courageous, professional and on top of their game.

7:19-25

Gideon defeated the Midianites by a mere illusion, sound and light. It was not the military excellence of Gideon's three hundred men, but their willingness and obedience, so that the Lord would get the glory. But notice how easily the enemy was defeated. By a few light and sound effects, the entire Midianite army was thrown into confusion. The ungodly are the same today (and sadly, some who profess salvation in the living God). So many are disoriented and confused by a few unexpected circumstances, by the sound of some criticism or the lights and glamour of

someone else's success on social media. IT IS AN ILLUSION—Our reality is in Christ. Let us, as Christians, keep our heads. Let us live by faith, and not fear, though the earth gives way, and the mountains move into the sea (Psalm 46:1-3).

8:1-27

This chapter continues the battle and the victories Gideon won. Gideon's response to the men of Ephraim is a good example of diplomacy and of how a soft answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1).

8:28-35

So, Gideon died, as all must die. Even good men die. But the people of Israel could not stand alone in the strength of the Lord. We all need

leaders (pastors, mentors, role models) to look up to and follow (see 1 Cor. 11:1). We also need to respect the memory of the dead (vs. 35) for the good they did. But when good men turn away from the Lord, we need to know the Word and stand strong in the truth (Galatians 2:11).

9:1-21

In Proverbs 4:23, we are told to keep our hearts with diligence, for out of the heart flow the issues of life. The conspiracy of Abimelech to rule over Israel, and the fickle, cheap and insecure Israelites, show us how quickly our hearts can be moved away from God. We also see how cruel selfish ambition can be. Abimelech had no regard for his family as he pursued his own goals. We will see in

the next paragraph how this works out for him!

9:22-57

The death of the wicked might be of "natural causes" or an act of extreme violence (vs. 53). But wicked men have their day, and judgment is not always reserved for the last day. Christians, therefore, should rest secure in the knowledge that God will deal with wicked and tyrannical leaders, just as he did with Abimelech. Death, judgment, and eternity will right all wrongs.

10:1-5

Some judges did heroic deeds and are celebrated for them. Others just "saved Israel" quietly and without extraordinary deeds of faith or

fanfare. But they were all the Lord's men and women, faithful in their own circumstances and to their own calling. This is where most of us as pastors will be. We will not be famous, celebrated or eulogised, but our calling is to be faithful to God in our own small church and our own sphere of service. We are to grow where we are planted.

10:6-18

The Israelites, like ourselves, are repeat offenders. "Again", they sinned against the Lord (vs. 6). How gracious and long-suffering the Lord is. The Lord told them that he would "save them no more" to draw them out and see their hearts. This statement was not an absolute refusal to save, but rather a conditional one,

as the rest of the story shows. They prayed more earnestly, put away the gods of the nations, and were willing to receive whatever punishment the Lord would give them (vs. 15). The Lord uses these means to draw us out and to reveal our love for him and our dependence on him.

11:1-28

The fickle and changeable Israelites despised Jephthah, but we're willing to use him when they needed a warrior. Faithlessness and fear will use any instrument. He was a man of war, a mighty warrior. "But," the Bible says, he was the son of a prostitute. God, however, uses the foolish, weak and despised things to confound the wise, strong and celebrated (1 Cor. 1:27-29). We all have weaknesses,

foolishness, and reasons to be despised, either in reality, or in our minds ... "but" the Lord can use us. Learn to love those "biblical 'buts'" (see also Ephesians 2:4).

11:29-40

In a rush of zeal for the Lord, Jephthah made a vow to the Lord that he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his door on his return from defeating the Ammonites. It was rash and foolish, but it was deliberate and sincere, and it followed the pagan practice of sacrificing one's own children (Micah 6:6-8). Often, in our fight for truth against the enemy, we can adopt the enemy's methods. There were no prophets in Israel to correct Jephthah as later kings had, or faithful men who

knew the law. Let our zeal for the Lord be informed, wise, and let our methods of worship and battle be according to Scripture.

12:1-7

Jephthah was a man of faith (Hebrews 11:32). He put his life on the line for the cause of God in Israel, and the Lord honoured him for it (vs. 3). But there are always those spiritual hitchhikers who want to hang on to faithful leaders for a free ride to success and self-gain. This was the Ephraimites (see Ch. 8:1ff).

Leadership, like spiritual growth, has a cost. If we are going to make progress, win victories, take ground, and honour God, then we will need to trust God and put our own livelihood,

and perhaps our lives, on the line for him.

12:8-15

We learn from our passage that the Judges in Israel were many and from various tribes (Ephraim, Zebulun, Judah). Judgement was the burden of the entire nation, not of any one tribe. The lives of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon, and their families, are recorded to suggest that the size of the family is not important in the office of the Judge (Jephthah had one daughter). But the office of judge was to maintain true religion, to keep the nation from the worship of the foreign gods. While nothing eventful occurred under the rule of Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon, their work was important.

13:1-28

The first thing we learn from the life of Samson is that God raised up the judges — they were God's men and women. Here, Samson's life is planned out from the beginning, as with all of us. This, of course, does not remove their responsibility — or ours. The Nazarite vow was a vow of consecration and separation which some took for a short period of time (Numbers 6:4-9, see also Acts 18:18; 21:24). Samson, however, was to be a Nazarite from his birth and throughout his life (vs. 7). There is an important lesson in Samson's strange calling, and one that should encourage us and arrest any unsettledness or self-ambition in our hearts. God calls each of us with our

own gifts and tasks, and he uses us in that sphere. Let us be God's men in God's place, doing the tasks that the Lord has assigned to our lives.

14:1-20

Samson's marriage was an "unequal yoke" (2 Corinthians 6:14), and it had secrets, distrust, and anger from the beginning (vss. 16-20). It was not a happy union, and in normal circumstances, it was forbidden. Think of it, however, in the broader context. As a deliverer and judge, Samson's whole life was tied up in the knot of Israel's sin. His marriage, according to the purposes of God, was to get an "opportunity against the Philistines" (vs. 4). His marriage, his whole life and eventual death were consecrated to God and display for us the tangled

mess of sin and the difficulty in delivering ourselves from it. We see the same in the life of Hosea (Hosea 1:2). We need to see our lives in the broader context of the Church and society—and realise that God has ordained it that way. There are difficulties and struggles in our lives that are directly related to our own folly and sin—we must own these. But the difficulties we face are often greater than we are, and we need to learn to manage ourselves within the context of a broader, sinful society or an unhealthy church life (see, for example, Matthew 5:39ff).

15:1-20

The tangled knot of love, a mixed marriage (vss. 1-2), and the indifferent Israelites who were willing to live

under the rule of the Philistines (vs. 11) is difficult to untie. To untie this knot, Samson must give his life's blood (Ch. 16:31). While the Israelites were indifferent and even assisting the Philistines, Samson had a faith firmly fixed in the God of Israel and a clear view of the enemy, the Philistines, and the task at hand. Although he may have had reason to react against the Israelites, victory would not have been gained by attacking his own people, however indifferent and frustrating they were during his time as a judge. Faith and focus are what we need in the ministry — faith in God and focus on the task he has given us.

16:1-22

The weakness in Samson's armour was women: his Philistine wife (14:1ff), the prostitute (16:1), and Delilah (16:4ff). But the gift and calling of God was on his life, and the Lord used even Samson's weakness against the Philistines (Romans 11:29).

Samson resisted Delilah as she tried to seduce him and discover the secret of his strength (vs.5, see vss. 6, 10, 13), but it was a weak resistance (only three times, vs. 15). Samson had put himself in the path of danger and it was not going to end well. Like Lot, Samson lived with vexation in his soul, rather than deal with the glaring problem in his life (vs. 16, See. 2 Peter 2:8). When we allow sin to remain in the heart and life, as Lot and Samson did, the Lord will not hear us (Psalm

66:18), and we lose our strength—the presence of the Lord (vs. 20).

16:23-31

Samson died with the Philistines (vs. 30). His life, so full of potential and hope at the beginning, had been destroyed by his personal weaknesses. He could not restrain his lust. He could not keep his body under control (1 Corinthians 9:27), nor his mind sober (1 Peter 1:13). There was indeed shame in his death—his eyes gouged out, his hair cut, his strength reduced, and a prisoner of the Philistines, among whom he died. But Samson died in victory. In the end, Samson turned to God. He received strength from God, and the old power he knew had been restored. In the end, Samson slew

more Philistines in his death than he had in his life. Let us put the past behind us (Philippians 3:13), let us reach forward with fresh faith in the living God and renewed zeal for his glory. And let us see if God will not give us more victories in our later days than in our youth.

17:1-13

God wants to be worshipped. But God must be worshipped as he has instructed us. Through a particular circumstance involving his mother at home, Micah developed a small worship centre of his own (vss. 1-5). How convenient it was when a Levite came along. From the correct tribe, but with no other credentials, Micah installed him as his own private priest (vs. 12). It is true that Micah had no

father-figure to instruct him (vs. 10). For the first time in the book the author explains the period of time—everyone did what was right in his own eyes (vs. 6). So, it was characteristic of the times, and no one gave it much thought, but it was wrong.

We must be diligent in how we administer the worship of the Church (Acts 20:28). It must be according to the Word, against the current trends, the culture, and not according to what works best for the people or is convenient for the pastor, or what is more financially successful. God must be worshipped God's way—he will honour it (1 Samuel 2:30).

18:1-31

There were several reasons for the anarchy during the time of the judges—Moses was dead, and Joshua was as well. There was no central authority (vs. 1). But also, they had not learned to live under the authority and provision of their God. They had failed in the initial conquest (vs. 1). When we reject the authority of the living God, our whole religious outlook is cheap, worthless and insecure. We put our trust in our own religious endeavours, and as Micah said, when he lost his images, "what else have I left?" (vs. 24). The Levite also, who was a religious mercenary, served only for what money he got and was willing to move on to another post for personal advantage (vs. 20).

19:1-30

While there were many outward threats (Amorites, Moabites, etc.), the last chapters of the book present the inward threats to Israel—idolatry (chs. 17-18), anarchy and injustice (chs. 19-21). The Levite in this chapter had acted wisely in many ways. He had reconciled with his concubine (vs. 3), deferred so many times to his father-in-law's requests (vss. 4-9), and avoided the foreigners in the city of Jebus, against the advice of his servant (vss. 11-12). But the situation in Israel had deteriorated so badly that it was like Sodom (vss. 23-26, see also Genesis 19). The Levite failed to protect his concubine, and rather than throw himself on the providences of God and face the men of the city, he

gave his concubine to them (vs. 25). He had not anticipated the depths of sin and cruelty of his own people in Gibeah, but it was a real awakening to the state of his country. In the end, the Levite represents a regular citizen who rises up, without the title or position, and calls for justice and reform (vss. 29-30). Sometimes, in the church, when leadership is lacking, we must act in the name of truth, but we must do it wisely and with counsel (see 20:7).

20:1-48

Civil war is particularly cruel and ugly. This war could have been averted had the Benjamites turned those over to stand trial, who had raped and murdered (vs. 13). But the Benjamites were stubborn. They were warriors,

men of valour (vss. 44, 46) and thought that they could carry the battle against the other tribes. But they did not know that disaster was close, because the Lord was against them (vs. 34). Remember the Levite, whose concubine had been raped and murdered. This man had stirred up the nation to seek justice and righteousness. Israel was now mourning over sin and seeking God for direction to purge it from among them (vss. 18, 23, 26-28). What level of sin, and what conditions must be met, before we are brought to weep over sin and seek the Lord?

21:1-25

Israel's return to the Lord continues from the previous chapter. They had been stirred up by the violation of the

Levite's concubine (ch. 19) and had purged the evil (ch. 20). They had also taken an oath as a nation, that they would separate from their brother Benjamin, and would not give their daughters in marriage to the Benjamites (vs. 1). However, while that oath was made sincerely, out of a desire for purity, they later recognised that Benjamin was a brother, part of the national identity and close to extinction (vs. 17). Israel, therefore, had compassion on the Benjamites (vs. 6), and there was then a desire to make peace (vs. 13).

We, like the Israelites, need to find innovative ways to make peace with the people of God and to maintain the family's unity, for the glory of God and the growth of the Church. The

Israelites found 400 young virgins from Jebesh-Gilead for the Benjamites to marry (vss. 8-15). But these were not enough. They could not go back on the oath and "give" them wives, but the oath said nothing about "taking" wives (vs. 22). So, the Israelites found a way for the Benjamites to "take" wives (maintain the oath), without the bloodshed of war (16-25). Lord, give us wisdom in the Church today, like the Israelites, that is born out of a desire for unity and a love for the Church of Christ.

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