

Understanding the Book of Judges

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. - Judges 21:25

Judges is a difficult book to read because it has a lot of bad behavior (to say the least). Reading this book out of context can be jarring. So the first step in understanding Judges is understanding the context.

When we first read this book, we may be really disturbed because we can't understand why God would ordain behavior like this, for any reason. Even accepting His sovereignty, how could a good God do or allow these things? And this is the problem: we read the book as a simple, historical account of God's people doing God's work. After all, isn't that what the Bible is all about?

No.

Actually, the book of Judges is about God's people falling away from God and doing terrible things. Why would God include these awful things in His holy word? We will look at that together in this study.

The book of Judges sits between the books of Joshua and Ruth. Just as the book of Joshua sets the stage for the book of Judges, so the book of Judges has a key lead-in for the book of Ruth. We will look at that during this study as well.

In the same way Moses had done before his death, when Joshua's end comes near, he takes the opportunity to encourage Israel to keep the faith as they continue to conquer the peoples of the promised land. In Joshua chapter 24, he methodically lays out the ways that God has been faithful to Israel (vv 1-13) and instructs them to serve God only (v. 14-15). The Israelites affirm God's faithfulness and declare that they will stay faithful to Him (vv 16-19). Joshua warns them what will happen 'if you are untrue to your God' and he sets up a memorial of this declaration.

The book of Judges picks up right there, in v. 1 saying:

After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, "Who of us is to go up first to fight against the Canaanites?"

And so begins the book of Judges. What we quickly find is that the nation of Israel does not fully remove the Canaanites from the promised land as God commanded. As a result, Israel lives among them, begins to adopt the Canaanite culture and abandon their own.

Remember, God had called the Israelites to be set apart (Joshua 4:24). All of the laws which God lays out in the Torah (especially in Leviticus) were designed to help Israel look and act differently from other people groups. These differences were designed to help the rest of the world better understand God and how to relate to Him and be in relationship with Him.

When Israel starts to lose their distinctive qualities and blend with the people around them, they forget their God, His laws and His promises. As a result, they find themselves in a bad cycle:

- **Disobedience** and sin leads to the
- **Oppression** of Israel (allowed by God, warned by Joshua), by the very people they were supposed to conquer. That oppression eventually brings Israel's
- **Repentance** and their faithful God provides
- **Deliverance**.

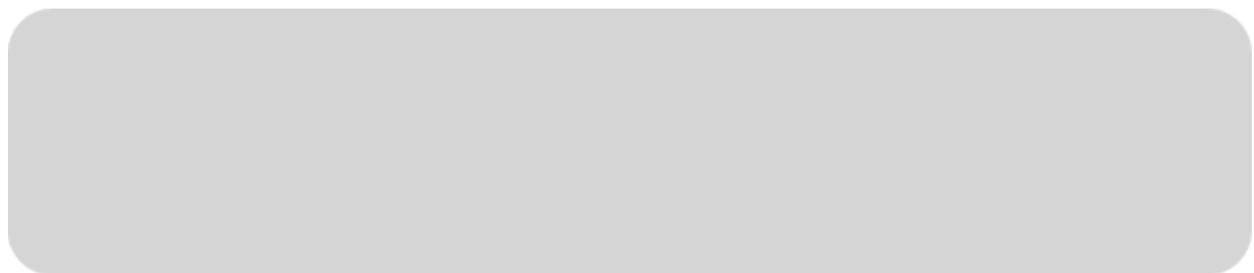
Unfortunately, it doesn't take long after deliverance before Israel falls back into the disobedience and sin that starts the cycle all over again.

In Judges, in addition to the cycle we mentioned above, there is also a steady downward trajectory in the state of faith and faithfulness each time Israel falls into disobedience and sin. So that by the end of the book, the account of the deeply sinful Israelites is really upsetting to read.

The depraved behavior in this book is connected several times to a lack of leadership, saying 'in those days there was no king in Israel.' The last line of this book puts a sharper point on it by saying:

'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.'

Read the warning in Joshua 24:27. How does this set the stage for the book of Judges?



Reflect on the cycle of disobedience and deliverance shown in the book of Judges. What do you think were the causes of that cycle?

What can we learn from this cycle that Israel experienced?

In the context of understanding the cycle of disobedience and deliverance in the book of Judges, why do you think that God included these sometimes difficult to read accounts in the book of Judges?

How do the accounts in the book of Judges set the stage for the book of Ruth?
(hint: read Judges 21:25 then Ruth 4:16-17)

What other reflections do you have on the book of Judges, from your own faith experience?

Can you relate to the cycle found in the book of Judges? If so, write those reflections here: