

Old Testament Survey—Judges

[note: I obtained helpful material in this lesson from class notes from Former Prophets class at Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, Prof. Leon Rowland]

*Messy*. That's the word that comes to mind. Life gets *messy* at times, and there's no getting around it. We don't live in a "Leave It to Beaver" world. We live in a world where at times families break apart, and companies let go 20 year employees, and government scandals don't surprise us. This is the *real* world, and at times it is *messy*.

One of the things I love about the Bible is how *real* it is. It doesn't gloss over problems. It doesn't make Bible characters look "too good to be true." It shows that real hope is available to real people with real problems through the grace of Jesus Christ. But it also shows just how difficult life can become for these real people when they turn from the God of grace. No book does that any more vividly than the book of Judges.

Discuss: What does the book of Judges bring to mind for you?

**Who wrote the book?**

We are not told, but perhaps Samuel.

**When was the book written?**

Background: Joshua's generation and the generation of those that outlived Joshua passed from the scene. A third generation arose who did not know Yahweh or the deeds He had done for Israel (2:10). The events recorded in Judges took place during the generations that following Joshua's death.

As to the date of the book's writing, we are unsure. The issue of date relates to the matter of purpose. Why was the book written? It was written to address specific problems in a particular historical setting in Israel's history.

Example: Since Judges emphasizes the need for good "leadership," it's possible that the book was written as justification for the Davidic Monarchy. It shows why a godly king like David was needed. It reveals in ugly detail what life was like in Israel when everyman did what was right in his own eyes.

After reading Judges, an Israelite couldn't help but conclude, "We need someone who will lead us after God's own heart!" So, the book is an apologetic for leadership.

Suggested Date: Early Monarchy period (Harrison, p. 690)

**What is the outline of the book?**

Observe: The book is disjointed. It presents Israel's history as being disjointed.

What ties the book together? It's history, but very selective history. We come away from reading Judges with as many questions as answers. Why are these stories included? Were there others? Are the judges models for us? Does God endorse their behavior?

*Overview of Judges:* In 2:6-3:6, we discover an overview of the entire book. There is a four-fold cycle that is repeated over and over:

- I. Prosperity: Yahweh sends prosperity to His people (2:6-9).
- II. Disobedience: The people respond with unfaithfulness and disobedience (2:10-15).
  - A. They forgot (10).
  - B. They forsook the true God (12).
  - C. They followed false gods (12).
  - D. They felt God's judgment (14).
- III. Judges: Yahweh graciously provides judges who bring deliverance (2:16-19).
- IV. Rejection: The people reject God's provision of grace once the judge dies (2:20-3:6).

*Outline of Judges:*

- I. Introduction (1:1-2:5)
- II. Overview of the Whole Book (2:6-3:6)
- III. The Cycle of Judges (3:7-16:31)
  - A. Othniel (3:7)
  - B. Ehud (3:12)
  - C. Shamgar (3:31)
  - D. Deborah (4:1)
  - E. Gideon (6:1)
  - F. Abimelech (9:1)
  - G. Tola (10:1)
  - H. Jair (10:3)
  - I. Jephthah (10:6)
  - J. Ibzan of Bethlehem (12:8)
  - K. Elon the Zebulunite (12:11)
  - L. Abdon (12:13)
  - M. Samson (13:1)

#### IV. The Concluding Failure of the Judges

- A. The Story of Micah (ch 17-18)
- B. The Story of a Levite and his concubine (ch 19)
- C. Civil War in Israel (ch 20)
- D. Wives for the Benjaminites (ch 21)
- E. The basic problem: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit (21:25)."

Key: All the Judges chosen were unlikely and unexpected sources of deliverance. Let's take a look at them one by one...

A. **Othniel** (3:7)

B. **Ehud** (3:12)--a left handed fellow who was shrewd and deceptive and used a murder plot to deliver God's people; he shook hands with his right hand so he could stab the king with his left! Ehud was a Benjaminite, which means "son of right hand," but he was left handed!

C. **Shamgar** (3:31)--used an oxgoad to kill 600 (an oxgoad was what was used to prod oxen along; eg--remember Jesus' question to Saul, "Is it hard for you to kick against the goads?")

D. **Deborah** (4:1)--a woman in a man's world

E. **Gideon** (6:1)--an unlikely candidate; small and least in his family (6:15); used 300 men to take a city by pure intrigue, surprise, and deception

F. **Abimelech** (9:1)--was he really a judge? A man who thought more highly of himself than he ought to have

G. **Tola** (10:1)

H. **Jair** (10:3)--a man who road 30 donkeys

I. **Jephthah** (10:6)--an illegitimate son; a bandit, a renegade, a man who made a foolish vow; one we would consider very unlikely to be a deliverer

J. **Ibzan** of Bethlehem (12:8)

K. **Elon** the Zebulunite (12:11)

L. **Abdon** (12:13)

M. **Samson** (13:1)--a man who both deceived and was deceived; He was the leader who had everything going for him (great parents, muscles, popular, etc), but he did wrong and fell. Then God used him in his weakness to do more than he did in his strength; He was deceived by Delilah and then he deceived a boy so he could pull down the Philistine temple.

Note: Samson epitomizes Israel at this time. He started out with a very unusual birth (as did Israel which was "born" into a nation out of Egypt ). He ended up in blindness and disaster (as did Israel ). His name meant "sun" ("Sonny"). He was a man who constantly broke his Nazarite vows (as did Israel her vows).

Judges, then, is a book of surprises and reversals. It's a book that shows that God's sovereignty over-rides

man's wickedness.

### **Why was the book written?**

Key: Just as the book of Joshua presents what happens when God's people obey God's covenant, the book of Judges tragically presents the opposite--what happens when God's people disobey God's covenant.

What is the purpose of the book of Judges? In a sense, there is no one purpose, but there are several overlapping purposes.

Picture an onion. What happens if you strip away a layer of skin from an onion? You find another layer. So it is with Judges. There are actually three different "layers" of application in Judges.

1. The Overall Purpose of Judges: Judges reveals the faithfulness of God to His people. He keeps His covenant, even if His people don't (2:1).
2. The Purpose of Judges for Israel : Judges underscores the need for godly leadership for the nation of Israel (21:25).
3. The Purpose of Judges for Individuals, including us: Judges reveals the horrible consequences of disobedience to God and God's commands (2:14).

### **What is the message of the book in one sentence?**

Judges reveals what happens when God's people fail to obey God's covenant.

1. They suffer judgment.
2. God is faithful to His covenant promises.

### **What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?**

Discuss: The book of Judges is an ideal book for ministering in an age like ours, an age full of brokenness. How so? Here are some vital themes we see in the book of Judges that the Bible develops elsewhere...

1. *God is a God Who is faithful to His covenant, even if His people are not.*

See: 2:1

Think of Samson again. He blew it, yet God used him to kill more in his death (3,000) than in his life. God's will is done even in spite of man's disobedience. Here's the point. Just think of what could be accomplished if man would obey!

2. *Judges reveals how much the world needed a genuine "Savior."*

The judges were "deliverers" (small "d"), but their success was only temporary and partial. There is only one "Deliverer" (capital "D").

3. *God is sovereign over history.*

Even when things seem bad (and are bad!), He is still in control.

Discuss: What are some other examples of this in the Bible? Here are some: Esther; The Cross; The Persecution of the early church, etc.

Some Lessons to Ponder:

1. No matter how bad you are, how bad your circumstances are, or how bad your background is, there is hope for you.
2. "Little things" can be mighty when God is in them.
3. We serve the God of the "second chance." That is, He doesn't discard us when we fail.