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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 15: THE JUDGES

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapters 7 “Judges” and 8 “Ruth” in *Discovering the Bible*, and (optional) chapter 15 “Deborah” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

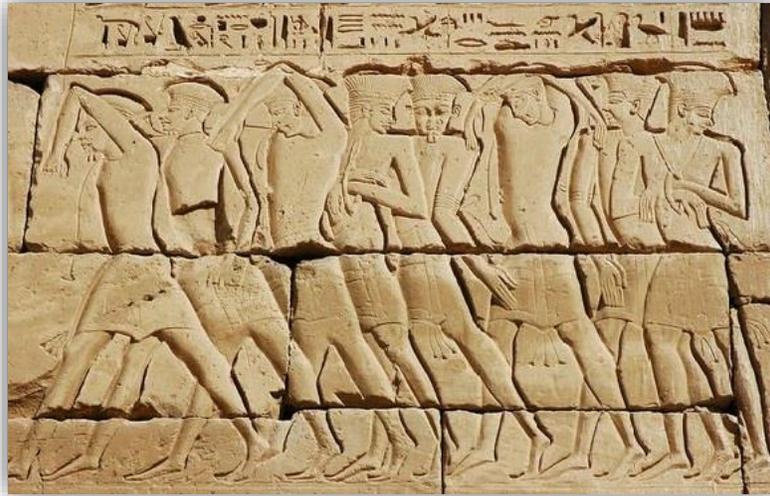
Read Judges 6-8 (Gideon); 11-12 (Jephthah); 14-16 (Samson) before reading the information on each of those leaders in the “Understanding the Text” section below.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The turbulent events described in the book of Judges cover a period of approximately 350 years – from the death of Joshua to the time of the prophet Samuel and the beginning of Israel’s monarchy. Unlike the book of Joshua, however – which describes an era largely characterized by Israel’s obedience to God – Judges describes a period of recurrent national unfaithfulness. The work may be classified as a tragedy, but it is one with many important lessons.

Sadly, soon after the death of Joshua, the people of Israel began to adopt the evil practices of the Canaanites they had failed to drive out of the land. This situation led to an ongoing cycle of widespread sin, oppression by a foreign power, national repentance, deliverance by a “judge” raised up by God, and then peace – which invariably led back to a new period of disobedience and sin. As a result, the book of Judges describes many tragic, violent, and sometimes disturbing events.

The enemies who oppressed Israel during this period give us a good indication of when the events in the book of Judges occurred. Israel was successively afflicted in its repeated periods of sinfulness by Mesopotamians, Moabites, Philistines, Canaanites, the people of Hazor, Midianites, Ishmaelites, Amorites, Philistines, Ammonites, and Philistines. The Philistines are mentioned more frequently than any other enemy, however, showing that they were the greatest threat to Israel at this time (see, for example, Judges 10:7-8). It is known archaeologically and historically that the Philistines were a seafaring people who had arrived in Canaan along with other migrating peoples (see Note 1) around 1175 BC – dovetailing once again with a late rather than an early date for the exodus and entry into Canaan of the Israelites. Bolstering this historical fact, the Egyptians – who controlled Canaan down to about 1250 BC and then withdrew – are mentioned only once in the book of Judges (Judges 10:11), at the beginning of the period of Judges and not after.



Philistine Prisoners of War depicted on the Medinet Habu Temple, Luxor, Egypt. Image: Archival.

Despite the many wars described in Judges, there are some rays of hope in the story. One is that Judges does say the land had a number of periods of peace, but it does not describe or focus on them. We should remember, for example, that the beautiful story told in the book of Ruth is set in the period of the judges (Ruth 1:1; and see Note 2). However, the purpose of Judges is not to look at these short periods of good, but to focus on the fact that for most of that time the Israelites had become exactly like the Canaanites they were supposed to drive out.

The judges God raised up to rescue Israel in this period did not oversee only legal matters, as judges do in our own society, they also functioned as military and administrative leaders. The Hebrew word used of them, *shofet*, also appears in other biblical passages (Psalm 2:10; etc.) where it refers to kings and means “leaders.” But the judges had no hereditary authority like the later kings – they were raised up by God only at times when the Israelites were being crushed by their enemies and they cried out to God for help.

Twelve such individuals are mentioned in the book of Judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon and Samson – though there may have been more that are not recorded. Judges highlights only six of the twelve individuals it discusses (the others are only mentioned in a paragraph or so – or even a single verse). Of the six judges whose actions are recorded in some detail, the first three (Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah along with Barak) seem to have been relatively good, but the next three (Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson) were increasingly flawed as the nation spiraled ever downward during this era. In this study unit we will focus on these final three judges in order to assess the situation during their times and to better see the major lessons of the book.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Gideon, the first of the final three recorded leaders of the period, was by far the best of the group, and there are more verses dedicated to him than any other judge (Judges 6:11-8:34). Gideon led Israel at a time when the armies of Midian were destroying their trees and crops “like swarms of locusts” (Judges 6:5), and many Israelites were reduced to living in rocks and caves. At that time we are told that the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, saying “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior” (Judges 6:12). This is not to say that Gideon was actually a mighty warrior – that is just the significance of his name in Hebrew.

He appears to have been a very cautious young farm worker whose personal fear was noticeable and ongoing. When the divine visitor commanded Gideon to save Israel, he resisted and asked for a sign. Soon after, Gideon was told by God to destroy his community's Asherah pole (a cultic object used in the worship of Baal) and replace it with an altar to the Lord. He did this, but at night out of fear of his neighbors (Judges 6:25–32). Notice that in this episode Gideon was defended by his father, and we do not get the sense that Gideon was a “mighty warrior” perfectly able to defend himself.

This assessment seems to be confirmed as we progress through his story. Gideon repeatedly asked for signs that God would help him (Judges 6:37, 39; etc.), and this may have been partly why God then reduced Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 fighting men. Once again, Gideon needed reassurance (Judges 7:13–14), and it was only then that Gideon was finally willing to act and God was able to work through him. Gideon's slowness of faith (despite his being mentioned in the “faith chapter” of Hebrews 11) is perhaps the reason the Bible never states that he “saved Israel,” as is the case with most of the other judges. Gideon did eventually lead Israel effectively in battle, but his ongoing “give me a sign” attitude seems to reflect only a small amount of faith. Later, Gideon constructed an ephod – an elaborate object connected with receiving oracles – and set this object up in such a way that it began to be worshipped by the Israelites and became a “snare” or “trap” to Gideon himself (Judges 8:27). Nevertheless, Gideon was instrumental in rescuing Israel, and Judges ends its account of his life by stressing “all the good things he had done for them” (Judges 8:35).

When we turn to Jephthah (Judges 11-12), the next major judge, we see that he successfully rallied Israel against the Ammonites – without ongoing reassurance, as Gideon had needed – but his leadership was marred by the very foolish vow he made to God: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering” (Judges 11:30). As he should have realized might happen, “When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter” (Judges 11:34 and compare 1 Samuel 18:6). Although Jephthah said he could not break his foolish vow (Judges 11:38), scholars have long debated whether he did in fact sacrifice his daughter. While some feel that he “symbolically” sacrificed her by keeping her unmarried for the rest of her life (Judges 11:37-39) – and it is difficult to believe that he would be included in Hebrews 11 if he actually sacrificed her – other scholars feel the plain sense of the text is that he did, in fact, do as he had vowed (Judges 11:36, 39). In either case, the story of Jephthah underscores the Israelites' tragic loss of understanding of the nature of God in this time period – in thinking that he would want such a sacrifice.

The story of Samson (Judges 14-16) is a climactic one showing the deliverance of Israel – by the hands of only one man. But it is a story that is full of wrongdoing that demonstrates how far away from God Israel had slid. Interestingly, Samson is one of the few individuals mentioned in the Bible who was born miraculously despite his mother's inability to conceive children, and one of a very few mentioned in the Old Testament who was dedicated to God as a Nazarite (Numbers 6:1-21) from birth throughout his whole life. Yet there is an obvious dark side to Samson. The name Samson itself is a form of the Hebrew word “sun” and his home was just outside the town of Beth Shemesh (meaning “house” or “temple of the sun”), apparently a center of pagan sun worship in Israel. His story is remarkable in showing that he routinely broke the commandments regarding interaction with others (disobedience to parents, lying, stealing, fornication, coveting, etc.). Although he lived and died as a heroic figure, his failings were clearly as great as his legendary strength.

But Samson did effectively counter the Philistine suppression of Israel and served as a judge of his people for twenty years. And despite his many questionable deeds, Samson clearly obeyed the impulses produced by the Spirit of God in his mind, and God was able to powerfully use him to help his people.

The book of Judges is not written in an entirely chronological manner and the final chapters – which contain some of the most tragic and disturbing stories in the book – appear to be taken from the times of various judges. The purpose of this final material in the book is to demonstrate, and actually highlight, the terrible problems of the period – and to graphically summarize Israel’s need for the centralized authority of a monarchy.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

There are two very different possible views of the book of Judges that affect the theological lessons we might learn from this work. One view sees the book as cataloguing the many failings of the judges themselves, as well as Israel as a whole. The central verse that summarizes this situation tells us, “In those days Israel had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25 ESV) – there was no established authority, and anarchy often ruled as a result. Not only is this verse the closing statement and summary of Judges, but its point also appears in a total of four places in the book (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Importantly, the statement applies as much to many of the judges as it does to the people of the time, and the overall evidence of the book suggests many of the judges were not more moral than the people they led. This is the conclusion of the majority of modern scholars.

On the other hand, another view of the book is possible. Judges 2:16-17 seems to say that it was the people who were to blame, not the judges, for the evils of the era – indicating that the judges were better than the people of the time. And, in their stories, we are repeatedly told that God’s Spirit worked through even the seemingly worst of the judges. In fact, despite their apparent problems, the great “faith” chapter of the New Testament, Hebrews 11, singles out four of the judges (Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah – see Note 3) as individuals of notable faith from this period – more than are mentioned from any other Old Testament book, apart from Genesis which deals with a far longer span of time. This view asserts the judges were spiritual heroes, even though – like all of us – they may have had problems and weaknesses. Traditionally, this has been the view of many scholars who have studied the book.

But it may be that the apparent conflict between these very different views of Judges is a result of the fact that they are both true. While the book of Judges itself clearly paints a grim picture of the era and many of its leaders, the New Testament just as clearly endorses the faith of a number of the same individuals. In doing so, the New Testament accepts the fact that God is able to raise up and use leaders who may very much be the product of their own times and who may exhibit many weaknesses. This does not mean that we need to try to explain or condone many of the things the judges may have done, but that while not accepting their behavior, we should not be blind to the fact that God could and did use them for good – as is doubtless the case with many modern leaders, also.

In this mediating view, we see the patience of God as all the more remarkable in that he consistently and continually has shown kindness to his people – when many turned to him – through the efforts of leaders he raised up despite their obvious flaws. As we will see later in this course, that is a pattern we can often discern in biblical history. This was the case with individuals such as Cyrus toward the end of the Old Testament, just as much as it was true in the era of judges like Jephthah and Samson.

The book of Judges is a study not only in the sinfulness, anarchy, and even civil wars that may occur when people turn from God, but also in the divine patience, guidance of events, and ongoing love that God shows when many do turn back to him – despite the problems and weaknesses of leaders he raises up to help them. This is probably how the book of Hebrews encourages us to read the book of Judges. Above all, however, Judges shows the Israelites’ need for a king to save them from themselves – and ultimately points forward, if we can see it, to the hope of the only king who can truly save: the Messiah.

* Note 1: The historical indications that the Philistines were originally from the islands of the Eastern Mediterranean has been confirmed by a 2019 genetic study of more than 150 bodies found in an ancient Philistine cemetery at Ashkelon on the coast of Israel. While the study found a good degree of mixing had occurred with local peoples, the Philistine genetic signatures clearly showed a European component that supports the indications that the Philistines had migrated – and settled in Canaan around the time of the judges.

* Note 2: In the Hebrew text, the book of Judges and the book of Ruth use many terms that are not often found elsewhere in the Old Testament – but while those Hebrew words are used in a negative sense in Judges, they are used in positive contexts in Ruth. While Judges shows foreigners being a curse to Israel, Ruth shows a foreigner being a blessing. Linguistically, as well as historically, Ruth shows us what the book of Judges could have been like if Israel had been loyal to God. For optional further information on Ruth, download the free e-book *Ruth: A Story of Strength, Loyalty, and Kindness* from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

* Note 3: In listing Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, it is interesting that Hebrews 11:32 does not place them in chronological order, as it does with all the other individuals named in that chapter. Rather, Hebrews changes their order, possibly to place the more notable individuals first. Whatever the reason for their order, the inclusion of these four individuals in Hebrews 11 encourages us to remember that faith can enable flawed people to accomplish great things for God.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

What is the significance of the Philistines for our understanding of the period of Israel’s judges?

Summarize the national behavioral cycle that is seen repeatedly in the book of Judges.

Which overall view of the book of Judges seems to best fit the evidence of both the book itself and the New Testament appraisal of some of the clearly flawed leaders of the period?

Looking Below the Surface:

What can we observe from the book of Judges as to the impetus of the change in spiritual environment after the death of Joshua and subsequent cycles of turbulence and peace?

Everyday Applications:

In what ways can we apply the lessons of the book of Judges to our attitudes toward our present-day leaders?

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