

# **“Here Comes the Judge!”**

## **A Study on the Old Testament Book of Judges**

**Session 1    September 23, 2020**

**The History, Background, & The Judges’ Cycle**

**Judges 1:1 – 2:5, 2:6 – 3:6**

### **The History of the Book of Judges**

The term “judge” in Hebrew literally means “rule” or “ruler”. So from the very outset, our imagery of a “judge sitting in a courtroom” to describe the primary figures in this Old Testament book is going to be shattered! The “judges” in this Old Testament book, instead, are primarily warrior rulers who lead Israel in fighting oppressive enemies. They were also involved in maintaining Israel’s religious life and religious institutions in some form for a short period of time. The span of time the book of Judges covers is approximately 325 years, beginning with the death of Joshua and ending with the rise of the monarchy with the nation of Israel under Samuel and Saul.

Most biblical scholars believe that the book of Judges includes a two-part opening (1:1 – 2:5, 2:6 – 3:6) and a two-part conclusion (17:1 – 18:31, 19:1 – 21:25), adding extra emphasis to the importance of the transition points of this historical time period. Leadership, or the lack thereof, is a key theme in the book of Judges. The historical dating, based on the battles and the Judges included in the book, is 1375 B.C. to 1055 B.C. (approximate death of Samson, the final judge). Saul is anointed the first king of Israel in 1050 B.C.

### **The Background of Judges**

Leadership. Strong leadership is what the tribes of Israel had been familiar with. From their escape from slavery in Egypt to their initial conquering of the Promised Land in Canaan, the tribes of Israel had a leader that they could look to for direction, not just for wisdom and military insight, but as a spiritual leader for the people. Yahweh had guided them through the Red Sea, through the wilderness, and across the Jordan River, but they always had a leader who served as a barometer for their spiritual and physical benevolence. First, it was Moses. Upon Moses’s death, he appointed Joshua to lead the tribes of Israel. However, upon Joshua’s death, he did not appoint a specific leader to take over for him. Why?

A few possible reasons...

1. The tribes had entered the Promised Land and had started scattering among the tribes – decentralizing. Hard to appoint “one leader.”
2. No one leader emerged among the tribes as “the next one up”. Joshua did not feel comfortable passing on the mantle.
3. Joshua felt the task was complete – entering and conquering the land in the Promised Land. A centralized leader was not needed any longer.

Whichever the reason, the tribes of Israel were left without an outright leader.

A few things to remember about the book of Joshua as a precursor to Judges – (1) First, God tells the tribes of Israel the dimensions of the lands of Canaan that “He will give them.” (2) Second, God reminds the tribes that their Lord-led military advances must be followed by a humble walk with the Lord – they must be obedient to God. (3) God commands the tribes that as they enter the new lands that they should “drive out” the current inhabitants – not enter into any covenants with them, serve their gods, or intermarry. This was a spiritual command to prevent the worshiping of other idols or gods. On this third point is where we see cracks forming for the tribes of Israel, a leadership vacuum taking place, and we enter the pages of the book of Judges.

### **Judges 1:1 – 2:5**

One thing to remember as we enter the pages of Judges is that while we will see a repeated list of characters and “heroes”, the reoccurring champion is God himself. At this point, the tribes of Israel have been faithful in following God, but flawed. Under Joshua’s leadership, the tribes were united in conquering the land of Canaan. However, upon entering the land and “separating” the land out, each tribe was given the task to drive out the remaining inhabitants and city-states from their designated land. Chapter 1, verses 1 through 18, serve as a glimpse of how these regional battles took place in the tribal lands scattered across the Promised Land. From the outside eye, it looks like the tribal battles were successful. For example, Judah with the help of his brother Simeon was able to drive 10,000 men out of Bezek (1:4). The story goes on to say they found the leader of this people group, Adoni-bezek, and they cut off his thumbs and big toes. This action was a way of mocking this leader; he was later carried to Jerusalem and he died there. However, God’s command was to drive the

Canaanites out of their land or to kill them. While the battles were successful, the follow through was not always what God intended.

One glimmering example of a faithful family during these battles was the family of Caleb, as described in chapter 1, verses 11 through 16. Caleb, the same Caleb who served as the faithful spy in Numbers along with Joshua, and because of his faithfulness was granted whatever land he desired in the Promised Land, offers up a his daughter Achsah as a wife to whoever can capture the city state that lies on his designated land. Othniel steps up to the challenge and succeeds. However, what Caleb truly desires is someone who is obedient to God like he has been and who will be obedient with his family. (Othniel will later emerge as one of the Judges.)

If the story of the military conquests in the Promised Land ended there, things might seem okay. However, verse 19 reveals a complete shift in tone and faith. *“Now the Lord was with Judah (and the tribes), and they took possession of the hill country, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had iron chariots.”* The people’s trust in God only goes as far as they think they can go – so is it trust in the first place? God commanded Israel to drive out the inhabitants out of the land. Was this harsh? Yes, maybe. Why did he command this? He knew the spiritual corruption that this would lead to. Yet, the Israelites failed to do it. They failed to have faith in HIS strength!

Judah failed in the valley. Caleb succeeded in Hebron. Benjamin failed in Jerusalem. Joseph succeeded in Bethel, even though they allowed a man and his family to escape because of his help, which he joined with the Hittites. Manasseh failed in driving out inhabitants in multiple regions. Ephraim failed to drive out the Canaanites in Gezer. Zebulon failed to drive out the inhabitants in two separate regions, instead putting the people into forced labor. Asher, Naphtali, and the sons of Dan all failed to drive the inhabitants out of their regions as well. In many cases, the reasons implied is that economic sense (forces labor) required less effort than to follow God’s command – convenience trumped obedience! In other cases, superior courage is found in the will of the Canaanites instead of the “followers of God”.

Now, the tribes of Israel live among a people who worship multiple gods and idols. Trouble is looming for the “people of God”. God is not happy, and an “angel of the Lord” is sent from Gilgal to deliver the message. Why Gilgal? In Joshua 5, the people of Israel made a covenant with God and entered a

relationship built on grace and faithfulness. God had held up his end of the bargain, but the tribes of Israel had not. Their failure to tear down the altars of the Canaanites and to make no covenants with the inhabitants would serve as ongoing strife for the tribes. This is the setting for the book of Judges and beyond. While the tribes of Israel were remorseful, the stage had been set.

### **Judges 2:6 – 3:6 – The Judges’ Cycle**

As we stated in the history of the book of Judges, this Old Testament text seems to have two “openings”. Chapter 2:6 through 3:6 serves as a cyclical overview for the Israelite spiritual experience. The section, once again, begins with Joshua, recapping his life and leadership, and sharing that he was buried in the Promised Land as any good leader deserves. However, verse 10 through 12 indicates the rise of a “unfaithful” generation, who did evil and served other gods. This leads into what is referred to as the Judges’ Cycle, a pattern that is seen over and over in the writings of Judges.

The Judges’ Cycle (found in verses 10 through 19 in chapter 2) is as follows...

1. The tribes of Israel rebel against God, often worshipping the gods of the people of Canaan (Baal, Ashteroth, etc.)
2. God is provoked to anger by the Israelites actions, and allows another people group to rise up and invade, plunder, or oppress the tribes of Israel.
3. The distress causes the tribes of Israel to cry out to the Lord, asking for repentance for their actions.
4. God sends rescue through a chosen leader, a “judge” to put down the oppressors, creating a time of peace for the tribes.
5. When the “judge” dies, the tribes once again turn away from God and rebel again.

As we will notice as the book of Judges progresses, the time of “peace” created by the “judge” becomes shorter and shorter. The rebellion of the tribes become worse, the oppression heavier, the repentance less heartfelt, the judges more flawed, and the salvation and celebrations “weaker”.

This section concludes with a list of people groups that remained in the Promised Land that the tribes of Israel had failed to drive out of the land that God had given them. Instead of having trust in God to lead them to do this, now God

would use these same people groups to try, oppress, and create strife for 300 years during the time of the Judges.

### **Follow Up Questions...**

*How often does our “trust” in God go as far as our “trust” in ourselves? What can we learn from the opening chapters in the book of Judges about “trust”?*

*How does this Old Testament book’s focus on leadership reflect the importance of having wise, faithful leadership in our world?*

### **Next Week...**

**“Here Comes the Judge” – Session 2**

**Wednesday, September 30 6:30 PM**

**Focus – Othniel, the Judge Judges 3:7 – 3:11**