

"JUDGES"

(An Israelite Disaster: They Become Like the Canaanites)

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Throughout the Bible, God calls on his people to be different from the unbelievers. He wants his people to be set apart to serve him. He wants them to be holy and to be faithful to him and him alone. Judges is one of the most tragic books in the Bible, for after God saves Israel out of Egypt and gives them the wonderful Promised Land, they stay faithful to him for only one brief generation. Then they collapse completely, embracing the idolatry and degenerate behavior of the Canaanites. The end of Judges is unbelievable—and rather disgusting—as Israel sinks to a new low and becomes just like the Canaanites they were supposed to drive out of the land.

What is the Setting of Judges

The story of Judges begins right where the book of Joshua ended. God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and entered a covenant relationship with them (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), stating very clearly that if they remained faithful to him and kept his laws, then they could live in the wonderful Promised Land, with God dwelling in their midst and richly blessing them. However, throughout Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, God warns them that if they abandon him and turn to idols, embracing the corrupt behavior associated with idolatry, then he will punish them and even expel them from the land. In the book of Joshua, under Joshua's leadership, Israel moves into the Promised Land, defeating the major powers in the region and capturing most of the fortified cities. The book of Joshua ends by noting that the leaders of the first generation that entered the land remained faithful to God all their lives. Thus the book of Joshua is very positive, a "good news" book. Judges picks up the story just as this first generation is passing off the scene, and things are about to change drastically.

What is the Heart of Judges

The purpose of Judges is to show the failure of Israel to keep the Mosaic covenant (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) after God gives them the Promised Land. The book of Judges paints a dreadful picture of a rapid, downward decline, both theologically and morally. A terrible cycle is repeated over and over. The people sin and turn away from God, and thus a foreign nation will overrun them and oppress them. God, in his mercy and grace, will send a judge to deliver them and re-establish peace and blessing. The people, however, will soon turn away from God again, only to be conquered and oppressed again. God will send another judge to deliver them, and the pattern will repeat. However, as the story moves along, things seem to get worse and worse. Most of the judges themselves are tainted in some way, and they do not quite measure up in their behavior.

Along the way the reader begins to realize that not only have the Israelites failed to drive out the Canaanites, but they are quickly becoming like them themselves, serving Canaanite gods and embracing Canaanite morality. At the end of the book things are absolutely disastrous. A Levite becomes a leader in idol worship, selling out to the highest bidder; the tribe of Dan leaves its inheritance and migrates north, also falling into idolatry; an Israelite city behaves just like Sodom and Gomorrah (the prototype for Canaanite immorality), attacking a visitor; and rather than driving out the Canaanites, the Israelites unite to destroy one of their own tribes (Benjamin).

It is also enlightening to note which people the Israelites are fighting in this book. At the beginning they are fighting the Canaanites, attempting to complete the conquest as God commanded them. But soon they find themselves oppressed by and at war with the Moabites, Midianites, and Ammonites, peoples from outside the land that Israel



had soundly defeated back during the exodus. So things are going backward for them. In Judges 13-16 the Israelites are struggling against a new group, the Philistines, who, like the Israelites, have recently migrated into the region and are trying to take over Canaan. The Philistines threaten to drive Israel right out of the Promised Land. Then, if this wasn't bad enough, the Israelites are simply killing each other.

An outline of the book follows:

- The Cycle of Disobedience (1:1-3:6)
- The Downward Spiral of the Twelve Judges Who Deliver Israel (3:7-16:31)
 - Othniel (3:7-11)
 - Ehud (3:12-30)
 - Shamgar (3:31)
 - Deborah and "what's-his-name" (4:1-5:31)
 - Gideon and his boys (6:1-9:57)
 - Tola and Jair (10:1-5)
 - Jephthah (10:6-12:7)
 - Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15)
 - Samson (13:1-16:31)
- Israel Hits Rock Bottom (17:1-21:25)
 - Othniel (3:7-11)
 - The Levite, the Danites, and Idols (17:1-18:31)
 - Sodom and Gomorrah Revisited (19:1-30)
 - Killing One Another (20:1-21:25)