

The book of Judges spans 410 years total and is historically situated between Joshua's conquest of the land of Canaan and the beginning of the Jewish monarchy, beginning with the last judge and prophet, Samuel and his anointing of Saul and David, and about 480 years to the reign of Solomon.

The book of Judges covers the time between the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, described in the Book of Joshua, and the establishment of a kingdom in the Books of Samuel. The book is divided into three parts:

Overview of the Book:

- Part 1 (chapters 1–2) describes the failure of the Israelites to drive out the remaining Canaanites. These chapters highlight the consequences of disobedience. This is contrasted with Joshua's legacy, as we stated last week. A heritage of faithful, unifying, courageous, collaborative, and spiritual leadership.
- Part 2 (chapters 3–16) tells the stories of the Judges who leave Israel worse than they found it. They are raised up by God to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors.
- Part 3 is a two-part epilogue (chapters 17–21) describing the depth to which Israel has fallen. The epilogues describe the horrific civil war between the tribes.

Some Features of the Book:

- The book is brutal. It definitely gets a PG-13 rating. There is the assassination of Eglon (Judge 3:21–25); the killing of Sisera (4:21); the executions of Oreb, Zeeb (7:25), Zebah and Zalmunnah (8:21); the murder of sixty-nine of his siblings by Abimelech (9:5); the assassination of Abimelech (9:53–54); the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (11:39); Samson's suicidal mission to take out the Philistines (16:30); and the murder of the Levite's concubine (19:27). There are 79 individuals named—and that doesn't include the extensive killings of tens of thousands of Canaanites, Perizzites, Moabites, 120,000 Midianites, 1,000 people burned to death in Shechem (9:49); 42,000 Ephraimites (12:6); 39,000 Israelites slaughtered by their fellow tribesmen, and 25,100 Benjaminites (20:35). That's a total of 242,730 casualties (and those are the ones we know about). No wonder this narrative is bookended with weeping (2:4; 20:23; 21:2).
- The author interprets the violence. The book is not merely an unvarnished account of the brutality of this 400-year period, it is a theologically interpreted account intended for us to see the consequences of failing to rid our lives of idols we worship. It shows us how we become our own worst enemies as we watch Israel spiral into one catastrophe after another, each judge worse than the last, and each revival weaker than the previous. We learn that our greatest challenge does not

lie outside of us, but inside of us. ***The author intends for us, the readers, to see the consequences for tolerating the worship of false gods and then going to war with each other.*** The final chapters (17:1–21:25) demonstrate just how far Israel has fallen into dreadful idolatry, a collapse of their priesthood to Yahweh, pervasive immorality, and bloody civil wars highlighting their complete Canaanization—other than God’s gracious choice to preserve them despite their rebellion, nothing really sets them apart from the surrounding nations.

The Background of the Book:

- The cultural setting is the Ancient Near East (ANE). One of the most difficult things for us to do when coming to these stories is to understand what God was doing from the point of view of the ANE. This is a world without representative democracy—it is tribal and is led by elders; it is a world without an egalitarian free market—women and children are little more than property, and apart from agriculture, textiles, shepherding or tribal leadership, there are very few occupations available. This is why you will see odd things like concubines, slaves, the selling of daughters for a bride price, and household servants. The book of Judges is particularly Ancient and Near Eastern not modern and western in terms of its worldview and culture. So when we encounter odd things like this, it would be all too easy to judge them. It’s not dealing with the world as it *should be* but the world as it *was*. The Bible doesn’t approve of everything it records.
- The theological background of the ANE is Idolatry (polytheism and henotheism). Every time they fail, they face the constant temptation to become “Canaanized”—that is, merely absorbed into the idolatrous religions and practices of the surrounding countries.
- Idolatry in the ANE is directly tied to ethnicity and territory. And in this world, you can’t separate those two things. So, I want to say this clearly—*anyone who comes to a book like this or Joshua* (I am here thinking of the village atheists who criticize these accounts for things like ethnic cleansing and so on), *those critics simply do not understand this world.* Your worship of a false god, or an idol, is tied to your ethnicity. God has already told Abraham and Moses that he’s going to save the nations—but *before he can save the nations, he has to save one nation and separate them from the idolatrous and evil practices that are inherent to their ethnic identities.*

The Theological Message of the Book: Israel’s evil and idolatry is contrasted with God’s holiness; Israel’s infidelity to Yahweh is contrasted with God’s faithfulness. God is holy, and He is faithful to fulfill his promise to establish Israel and, through Israel, to save the nations. In God’s grace, he sustains them even when they are disobedient and evil. He sovereignly carries them along to the next chapter in the story.

Chapter 1 picks up the story at Joshua's passing and shows us the fault lines present in a post-Joshua era.

1. Judah and Simeon have some initial success. God chose the tribe of Judah and then Judah enlists the help of their brothers, Simeon and pledges to help them in their battles.

Judges 1:16–21 And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negeb near Arad, and they went and settled with the people. ¹⁷ And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath and devoted it to destruction. So the name of the city was called Hormah. ¹⁸ Judah also captured Gaza with its territory, and Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. ¹⁹ And the Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron. ²⁰ And Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said. And he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. ²¹ But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem, so the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.

Generally, we see that Judah and Simeon are making an effort to finish what Joshua and his elders started. I highly suspect that if the second half of the chapter had been like the first, this would be a very different book. But look what happens next.

2. The remaining tribes of Israel compromised. They were given the commission to drive the people out of the land (Deuteronomy 7:1–5, 16). They were to drive the people, their false religion, and their pagan practices of immorality out of Canaan. Chapter one is strange because it begins somewhat auspiciously—with God's choice of the Tribe of Judah and the relative victories of Judah and Simeon, Othniel, brother of Caleb's victory, and Joseph's tribe also victorious.

We see their failure takes on two forms:

- **They failed to rid their land of idolatrous worship.** The first phrase we see repeated again and again is They “did not drive out the inhabitants” (1:21, 27, 29, 30, 31, 33). This begins with the Benjaminites in Judges 1:21, “But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem, so the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.” Instead of pushing them back and driving them out of the land, they tolerated false worship of Baal and Canaanite false gods in their midst. How did they do this?
- **They cohabitated with Canaanites by enslaving enemy combatants.** The Canaanites “served as forced labor” (1:28, 30, 33, 35). As a result, Israel failed to drive the Canaanites out of the land, disobeying Yahweh and attempting to enslave them instead. We see this in summary form in 1:28 “When Israel became stronger, they made the Canaanites serve as forced labor but never drove them out completely.” This is a direct violation of Moses' command in Deuteronomy

20:16,17. With respect to the cities in Canaan that God gave them as their inheritance, “You must completely destroy them—the Hittite, Amorite, Canaanite, Perizzite, Hivite, and Jebusite—as the Lord your God has commanded you, ¹⁸ so that they won’t teach you to do all the detestable acts they do for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God.” Taking these people as forced labor allowing them to cohabit in the land is a direct violation of Moses’ command to rid the land of these people. Because they will teach Israel to worship false gods and to practice their abhorrent immorality associated with false religion.

We see then the results of this...

3. Israel experiences consequences for unfaithfulness. I want you to see the judgment is not merely punishment in the form of God withdrawing his presence from their battles, but it also results in their becoming oblivious to their faith.

- **God will no longer fight their battles.** Now this is first appearance of the Angel of the Lord—he will appear again in 5:23; 6:11; 13:13. The AOTL is probably a Christophany—meaning, it is likely an appearance of Christ in the OT. He’s the only angel that doesn’t refuse worship and he speaks, not on God’s behalf, but with God’s own authentic voice. But here he delivers a difficult message to hear.

Judges 2:1–3 Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, ² and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? ³ So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.”

They had no victory apart from God going to war on their behalf. They had no expectation of success, prosperity, or blessing in the land so long as they failed to remain true to God’s covenant with them and they tolerated pagan worship. This judgment will plague them for their entire tenure in the land—leading up to the Maccabean Revolt in 160’s BC.

Folks, this is literally the most dangerous position we could ever be in—out there on our own trying to face our battles and face the suffering and downturns of life on our own.

- **They become ignorant of their faith.** In addition to God withdrawing his presence is the consequence of their national illiteracy in biblical and spiritual matters. Let’s see it.

Judges 2:10 “That whole generation was also gathered to their ancestors. After them another generation rose up who did not know the Lord or the works he had done for Israel ... 3:7 The Israelites did what was evil in the Lord’s sight; they forgot the Lord their God and worshiped the Baals and the Asherahs.”

Notice how this ignorance comes—*it comes as a consequence* of their disobedience. And notice the correlation between their disobedience and their illiteracy, their ignorance and their forgetfulness.

Moses had prescribed precisely how they could remain faithful and knowledgeable. Deuteronomy 6:4–10 ESV “**Hear** (Heb. *Shema*), O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” The *Shema* of Israel involves two inescapable realities for Israel.

1. There is only one true God of the universe. There is only one God and Lord. He is category unique. He is category specific. And HE is THEIR God.
2. They are to remind themselves of “these words”—the covenant and the instructions. They are to be on our hearts as we love God with all that we are.
3. They are to pass this word on to their children—to ensure that the next generation does not forget God.

This is why this passage in Deuteronomy becomes so important to the Jews in Jesus’ day. The religious leaders in the first century knew their history—they had forgotten the God of wonders and his Words. They failed to pass them on to the next generation. And now, the consequence is a biblically illiterate and defeated generation.

So when Jesus is asked, “Good teacher—what is the Moses’ greatest command.” This passage (in Deuteronomy) is his answer. There is only one God, and we are to love our God with all that we are, and we are to pass this Word on to the next generation.

And we know what happens when we fail to that. Moral and spiritual madness follows.

Application

1. Measure success by your faithfulness not your intentions.

2. Refuse to compromise your faith.

They failed to rid their land of idolatrous worship.

They cohabitated with Canaanites by enslaving enemy combatants.

3. Face the consequences with confession and repentance.

Fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.

God will not despise a broken and contrite spirit.