

## Judges-by Tommy Lee

### Chapter 1

Judges may be unfamiliar; let's get a sense of the outline first. From 1.1 - 3.6 we witness the decline, the deterioration, and the apostasy of Israel after they entered the land. Then we'll see God's response. From 3.7 - 16.31 we'll meet the series of "Judges" that ruled Israel during these centuries, and study the contributions of each. Then the book concludes (17.1 - 21.25) with two very sad stories, revealing the utter chaos that Israel became at this time. In chapter 1, we see right away that something is wrong. Review Joshua 23.1-5: with the Lord's help, Israel would push the Canaanites out of the land. The story in Judges begins well, but we are disturbed by something in v.19. Then we're puzzled again by v.21. More compromise in vs.22-26, and then the rest of the chapter is just a string of failures. It begins with Canaanites living among Israelites (vs.27-30). But then *Israelites are living among Canaanites* (vs.31-33). And finally *the Israelites are being pushed out of the land* (v.34)! WHY? Hints give way to the explicitly-stated reason tomorrow, in chapter 2.

### Chapter 2

Yesterday we saw Israel sliding into one failure after another, militarily-speaking. Everything was in decline, in spite of God's promises of victory. Today the real reason and cause for these failures is revealed: Israel's unfaithfulness to the Lord. See vs.2b,3: "*But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? 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.*" (For covenant background, see Exodus 34.12-16.) If they had been faithful to their covenant with the Lord, things would have been very different. But when we break covenant with the Lord, sooner or later, it leads to bitter weeping (vs.4,5). And now, with the theme of Israel's unfaithfulness dramatically introduced from 1.1 - 2.5, the author backs up and gives another (more poignant) introduction to the whole book, from this perspective of their slide into apostasy (which means to *fall away* from the Lord, to *turn back* from following him). Note well that apostasy only takes one generation to take root (see vs.7,10).

### Chapter 3

With vs.1-6 the author concludes his 2nd introduction (mentioned yesterday), which actually fast-forwards us to the end of the period of the judges. Verses 5 & 6 is where we will be when we get to Judges 21. But, like Israel itself, there is *much* that we can learn on the way, *if* we are humble and contrite in spirit and tremble at God's Word (Isaiah 66.2). Remember: there is no such thing as an untested faith (v.4). And now, with v.7, we begin to meet the "judges" themselves: these chosen deliverers—empowered by God to serve and rescue his people—who will picture Christ (the Final and True Deliverer) in many ways. Note the basic pattern that will be played out in every judge, with occasional variations: Israel provokes the Lord by worshipping other gods (2.11-13; 3.7). The Lord hands them over to their enemies (2.14-15; 3.7). In great distress, Israel cries out to the Lord (2.15b; 3.9a). The Lord raises up a deliverer (2.16; 3.9b,10). But note what happens when that judge dies (2.17-19; 3.11,12, etc.). The cycle: Sin, Slavery, Supplication, Salvation. Repeat.

### Chapter 4

Interestingly, our Psalm of Prayer this week is 104. What makes that interesting is that Psalm 104 is a poetic, sung celebration of the historical event of Genesis 1. And we'll see that same

pattern today and tomorrow

in our readings: the historical event comes first (Judges 4), and then the poetic, sung celebration of that event (Judges 5). The Sin, Slavery, Supplication, Salvation, Repeat cycle we mentioned yesterday is on clear display here: in v.1, we see what will quickly become predictable after the death of a judge: the people return to apostasy (see 2.19; 3.11,12; and now 4.1). And after Sin comes Slavery (4.2), then Supplication (4.3), then Salvation (4.4). The mighty deliverance God worked for his people under Deborah—with a little help from Barak and a lot of help from Jael—is described in vs.4-24. But actually (and always), the Lord is the Hero of the story (v.15). Note: the honor and glory of victory goes to a woman when the man proves himself unworthy (v.9)... Jael is a Gentile (vs.11,17)... Sisera's head is crushed, a picture of Satan's coming defeat, Genesis 3.15.

## Chapter 5

Welcome to one of the most ancient pieces of surviving poetry in the world. And it is marvelous. For long ages this was sung in worship services, as a reminder of God's faithfulness and the great things he has done for his people. There are many interesting elements here: tributes borne to those who played their parts valiantly (chiefly Deborah and Jael, a little for Barak, and also the tribes that answered the call to battle), rebukes and even mockery given to the tribes who could not be bothered to participate, the "*mother in Israel*" role of Deborah (v.7) contrasted with Sisera's waiting mother and her thinly veiled unspoken dread, the vile reference to rape in v.30 as a hoped-for excuse for Sisera's tardiness, etc. But the main theme of the song is "*the righteous triumphs of the Lord*" (v.11). He is the one who went forth as the champion of Israel, marching out and unleashing all the power of heaven and earth against the enemy. See the references to nature itself overwhelming the pagans who themselves worshipped nature. But God is Creator. And Redeemer.

## Chapter 6

Remember the pattern: Sin, Slavery, Supplication, Salvation, Repeat. This time you can trace it out more fully over the whole of the Gideon story (6.1 - 8.35). But note that this time the Lord did not immediately respond to their supplication by sending them a deliverer. Instead, he first sent them a prophet to rebuke them for their apostasy (vs.7-10). Observe how the rebuke ends, and appreciate again that salvation is all of grace. Israel does not deserve salvation. And yet, the God of the Exodus did come to their rescue. Again. There are many similarities between Moses' call (Exodus 3) and Gideon's call (vs.11-24): the hero was hiding from the enemy... the hero is told of his mission... the hero complains that he is inadequate for the mission... God promises, "*But I will be with you*"... the hero receives a sign to confirm this calling.... and miraculous fire affirms the presence of God. But Gideon's faith is immediately tested: his own family and clan had become Baal worshippers. Yet Gideon proves faithful, is strengthened by the test, and given a new name. It's on.

## Chapter 7

Really quick, go read Isaiah 9.1-7. We mostly hear that passage around Advent and Christmas, but take note of v.4: "*For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.*" The whole of that passage has this mounting sense of joy and relief as the victory has been won, all the equipment of war is being abolished, and the spoil is now being divided. The deep darkness is giving way to a shining, great light! But v.4 is curious. All the oppression of the enemy has been broken "*as on the day of Midian.*" What does mean? What does it refer to? It refers to Judges 7 (where Midian is broken!), and it means that the Hero for which Isaiah 9 longs will be a New and Better Gideon! Gideon, in Judges 7, broke the back of Midian with a fighting force of 300—a far cry

from the 32,000 with which he started (do the math of v.3). But you know what? That 300 didn't even fight, actually. They stood there (see v.21). The point: we don't save ourselves in our own strength (v.3). We are saved by... One.

## Chapter 8

Proverbs 15.1 says, *"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."* When the men of Ephraim get offended, Gideon provides us with a perfect illustration of this wisdom. When we get over to the first six verses of chapter 12, we'll see that Jephthah (a later judge) took a very different approach when this same group feels slighted yet again. Let's pray that we may learn and live the wisdom of soft answers. But it's difficult to live consistently in that wisdom... as Gideon then illustrates in vs.4-21. There starts to grow in Gideon a harshness that replaces the earlier humility. And that hardening of Gideon is pictured for us in two of his sons. Jether, introduced suddenly in v.20, reminds us of the Gideon of chapter 6. Abimelech, introduced in v.31, will remind us of Gideon's harshness and brutality (compare 8.15-17 to 9.46-49). In v.23 Gideon rightly refuses kingship, for the Lord is the king of his people (compare 7.2 to 8.22), but... he goes on to name a son "Abimelech," which means "my father is king." And there's also the idolatry of v.27. Trouble is coming.

## Chapter 9

Gideon refused to rule over Israel as king (8.23). However, there seems to be a disturbing inconsistency between his public image and his personal life. At the end of chapter 8, we're reading about many wives, 70 sons, and a concubine! This isn't the behavior of a private citizen of Israel. This is the lifestyle of an ancient king! And not only that, but his son Abimelech bears a name which literally means *"my father is king."* That which Gideon seems to have secretly coveted, his son attempts to wrench with violent force. But the big theme of this chapter is the holy vengeance of God, whereby *"Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling"* (Proverbs 26.27). See this theme made plain in verses 23&24, then again in 56&57. And the precision with which God's vengeance is here orchestrated is almost mathematical. See how the bloody words of vs.1&2 are answered in vs.26-29. See how the ambush of v.25 is answered in v.34. See how the man who killed his brothers on a stone (vs.5,18) was killed by a stone (v.53).

## Chapter 10

In **vs.1-5**, we (barely) meet Tola and Jair; they seem to be included for the sake of the completeness of this history—45 years worth of it, together—but not much is said. Then we see our cycle begin anew: Sin, Slavery, Supplication, Salvation, Repeat. His name won't appear until chapter 11, but what you see next is the first part of the Jephthah story. His story will be told in five parts, with each part featuring some crucial dialogue. Part I is **vs.6-16**, in which Israel has once again fallen into apostasy (the "Sin" part of the cycle) and must face the consequences (the "Slavery" part of the cycle). In the midst of Part I we also see the "Supplication" part of the cycle, as Israel cries out to the Lord for deliverance. But rather than immediately sending a Savior, the Lord first confronts Israel for her shameful record of repeated apostasy, and that's what gives rise to the crucial dialogue for this part of the story. The Lord sees the shallowness of their repentance, and is angered by it. And that's where we need to stop and reflect. The Lord will not be *used* by us (vs.13,14).

## Chapter 11

The end of **Part I** of the Jephthah story sounded ominously final (see 10.13,14). And yet... 10.15,16 gave us some ray of hope: the Lord is impatient with their misery. So great is his pity and mercy (see 2.18; Hosea 11.8-9). **Part II** of the Jephthah story runs from 10.17-11.11; here

Jephthah is recruited to be the head of the Gileadites (after they had earlier rejected him, v.7), if only he will lead them in battle against the Ammonites. In **Part III** of our story (11.12-28) Jephthah shows us that he's not just some thug, as we may have suspected from his introduction in vs.1-3. He knows the covenant history of his people, he shows that he is capable of great leadership, and he appeals to the Lord. However, this effort at diplomacy fails, so in **Part IV** (11.29-40) the battle takes place. But the focus of this part of the story is not on the battle; rather, it is on Jephthah's vow. To understand this vow as full-time dedication to the Lord's service at the Tabernacle, akin to Hannah's vow with regard to her son Samuel (rather than as human sacrifice), see:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/rethinking-jephthah-foolish-vow/>

## Chapter 12

Just as the end of Gideon's story had some sadly regrettable notes, so does **Part V** of the Jephthah story, which takes place in 12.1-7. And speaking of Gideon, remember his interaction with the men of Ephraim in 8.1-4? (These men seem to regard themselves as the natural leaders of all of Israel, and always seem to be stirring up trouble if that's not working out for them.) Gideon answered them softly, with a Proverbs 15.1 strategy. Jephthah's strategy is somewhat different! But... note that in 8.1 these men merely accused Gideon fiercely; in 12.1 *they threaten to burn Jephthah's house over him with fire*. Jephthah meets this threat by first presenting the justice of his cause—just as he did with the Ammonites in the last chapter—but then turns to battle, after the effort at diplomacy fails. What results is an inter-tribal slaughter that ominously foreshadows where the book of Judges will tragically end, in chapters 19-21. In **vs.8-15** we quickly meet three other judges: Ibzan of Bethlehem, Elon the Zebulunite, and Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite.

## Chapter 13

We now enter the Samson narrative, which will take four chapters. Samson is the last of the judges whose stories are told in this book, and more space is devoted to him than to any other. Today's reading tells of his miraculous birth... Notice in v.1 we have the Sin and Slavery part of our now-familiar cycle, but the Supplication part doesn't follow, as we have come to expect. Contrast this with 3.9,15; 4.3; 6.6; 10.10. Perhaps the spiritual life of Israel has now circled down the drain to the point that they no longer even desire to cry out to God for deliverance. And that makes God's grace in sending Samson to them even more extraordinary. Note that God's kindness does not depend upon our deserving. Also note God's power over life and death; Samson's mother is barren. But he is the God who *"who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist"* (Romans 4.17). Also take note of the shadow in v.7: *"to the day of his death."* Like the One born of an even greater miracle (an even more barren womb!), Samson will save at the cost of his life.

## Chapter 14

Samson judged Israel for 20 years (16.31), but we're only given limited glimpses into his life. The first of these glimpses begins with his going down to Timnah (a border area controlled by Philistines at this time) in 14.1 and climaxes with Samson's slaughter of 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey at Ramath-lehi in 15.14-20. Keep in mind, as you read the Samson narrative, that one of God's purposes in giving Israel this judge was prophesied in 13.5: *"he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."* Samson began it; King David later completed it (2 Samuel 8.1). As we read in 14.4, the Lord was *"seeking an opportunity against the Philistines"* through his judge, Samson. Also note the role that *"the Spirit of the Lord"* plays in this whole narrative (13.25; 14.6,19). Samson was the Lord's chosen instrument for beginning this deliverance of his people, and nothing Samson could do—not going after foreign

women, not even his disregard of his calling as a Nazirite (13.3-7; Numbers 6.1-21)—could thwart God's purposes. See Romans 8.28.

#### Chapter 15

**On one level** this is a brutal story of ever-escalating retaliation, vengeance, and violence. Samson has lost his bride, so he retaliates. The Philistines have lost their crops, so they retaliate. Samson has lost his alleged wife and in-laws (note the depraved evil of Philistine "justice" in v.6!), so he retaliates. The Philistines have lost some men, so they retaliate, etc. **On another level**, we see the Lord using his chosen instrument to wreak havoc on his enemies. He intends to defeat the Philistines and their false gods and set his people free of their rule, and he intends to begin that work through Samson—even if Samson is wayward and unpredictable at times (like the church!). **And on yet another level**, we see in Samson's work several pictures of the work of Christ. As Samson was betrayed and handed over to the enemy by his own people (vs.11-13), so Jesus was betrayed and handed over to the Romans by his own people—even though Samson (like Jesus) was sent by God himself, to be their deliverer. But the people insist that they have rulers already (v.11; John 19.15).

#### Chapter 16

The second big story we get of Samson's life begins with his going to Gaza (one of the five chief cities of the Philistines) in 16.1 and climaxes with Samson's slaughter of 3,000 Philistines, including *"the lords of the Philistines,"* in 16.23-31, even though this victory cost him the sacrifice of his own life. Again, for all of Samson's waywardness, the Lord is fulfilling, through Samson, his stated purpose (13.5). Samson was separated unto God, but would at times resist that calling upon his life. Much like we do! He always struggled with the temptation to want to be like other men. Again, much like we do. And for a while he *did* become like other men! But, in God's sovereignty, *even that* was used by the Lord to fulfill his purpose against the Philistines through Samson. Samson could not be like other men any more than OT Israel could be like other nations or true Christians today can be like the world. God himself has set us apart. For all of Samson's failings, he is once more a picture of Jesus—who by his sacrificial death crushed our great enemy. Hebrews 2.14,15.

#### Chapter 17

One of the great ironies in the Samson story was how the Philistines were boasting that *"their god"* had delivered Samson into their hands (16.23,24). In reality, of course, it was the Lord who had done so, that he might cause their own ruinous downfall. There's great irony in this story as well, but we won't see it until chapter 18... and it won't be happy irony. It will be very disheartening. Judges ends with two stories that illustrate the repeated refrain (found in 17.6; 18.1; 19.1; 21.25), *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* These stories are misplaced, chronologically-speaking, but putting them at the end of the book highlights the moral chaos and spiritual insanity of the times, which threatened to utterly destroy Israel from within. The story starts with complete absurdity. A thief steals from his own mother, but she blesses him in the name of the Lord, vowing to use the money to make an idol for worship, but only uses part of what she vowed. The thief ordains his son as priest for this idol, but then later a Levite. Chaos.

#### Chapter 18

Back in 1.34 we saw that the tribe of Dan was unable to take full possession of their allotted land. So, part of them migrate to the north, where they can seize the land of a peaceful, quiet, remote, defenseless and unsuspecting people (v.7), rather than fight faithfully for the true inheritance God assigned them. In the process of that migration and conversations which

happened around it, the Levite who was serving at an altar for an idol (chapter 17) agrees to abandon his employer (Micah) and serve these Danites instead. Micah ends up a pathetic and broken man, v.24. But the Levite has happily re-opened for the business of pagan worship, under new management, for the people of God (vs.30,31)! And here is where we meet the great irony of this story that we mentioned yesterday. But remember... it's not happy irony, as in the Samson story. It's heartbreaking irony. This as-yet unnamed Levite who has been leading God's people in idol worship is the grandson of Moses himself (v.30). Such was the self-serving moral chaos and spiritual insanity of these times.

### Chapter 19

We now begin the last story in Judges, also meant to illustrate the repeated refrain: *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* Many deplorable things here. Note what normal hospitality among God's people looked like, in vs.3-9. Then see in vs.10-13 how the travelers decide that they will *not* spend the night in the pagan town of Jebus; *that might be unsafe!* Instead they will keep traveling and seek hospitality among their fellow Israelites, *God's people!* But once they get there, no one takes them in (vs.14-15). When an old man finally does take them in, his warning about not spending the night in the square reminds us ominously of the story of Lot and Sodom in Genesis 19. And then, sure enough, Israel shows itself to be as debased as Sodom. The threat of homosexual mob-rape, the offer of two innocent women to violations, the self-serving sacrifice of one of those women (*I wonder why she left this man earlier, v.2?*), the cold callousness towards her the next morning, and then... v.29. Was she even dead yet (v.28)?

### Chapter 20

The dismemberment and distribution of the concubine certainly grabbed the nation's attention... as I suppose it still would today. The people come out *"from Dan to Beersheba... as one man"* (v.1)—which is the biggest response to a call to action seen in the whole book of Judges. And it wasn't by one of the judges! It was by this Levite. Keep in mind that to the crowd assembled that day this religious leader (the Levite) seems to be possessed by righteous and holy zeal as he recounts the outrage that led him to call the assembly in such a grisly fashion. But we, the readers, know more about his own behavior in Gibeah than he lets on; he coolly distorts the story, camouflaging his own complicity (compare 19.25 & 20.5). Israel decides to go to war, and many things seen here parallel the preparations for holy war seen in chapter 1. But this is far different than chapter 1. That was a united Israel fighting the Canaanites at God's command, and with his blessing. This is a divided Israel fighting brother against brother (v.28), and the Lord is judging both sides.

### Chapter 21

At the beginning of this chapter we are told about two oaths (see v.1—no giving of our daughters in marriage & v.5b—any town not coming to the war would be put to death) that the assembly took, back in chapter 20, to insure that Benjamin was punished and that all of Israel participated in it. But now, due to the extreme slaughter of 20.48 (*"And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire."*), the entire tribe of Benjamin is about to go extinct. The solutions to this problem that they come up only further illustrate the moral chaos and spiritual insanity of the times. The same people who were so outraged at violence, commit unthinkable violence (vs.10-11). The same people who were so outraged at the rape of the Levite's concubine now ask the men of Shiloh to be *"graciously"* okay with the kidnapping and rape of their daughters and sisters (vs.16-23). *"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"* (17.6).

**-Reflecting on Judges-**

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in Judges. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish Judges before we move forward?

*"And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Deuteronomy 8.3*