

A Brief Reflection on the Book of Judges

I can't think of any portion of Scripture more depressing than Judges. I struggle to read it. But it has an important lesson for us today, so we need to think about it. My discussion here will be brief, mainly because of its tragic content.

Judges begins well, ends badly. Same for the Church. It began great, as narrated in the Book of Acts. Its ending . . . well, read Paul's prophecy in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days," referring obviously to the situation *within* the church. The church will have "a form of godliness but denying its power." There won't be any difference between inside the church and outside the Church at the time of the last days, except that it'll have a veneer of Christian religion. *All* dispensations end in failure. Even the Millennium will end in failure. In spite of ideal conditions, with justice in all the earth and the exalted Son visible there on a throne in Jerusalem, there will be rebellion against God (Revelation 20:7-10). So the Old Testament era ended in failure. And so will the current Church age. Let's go now to the text.

Chapters 1, 2 of the Book of Judges serve as an appendix to the Book of Joshua and prologue to Judges. Chapters 3 to 16 narrate the stories of failure under each of the judges. Chapters 17 to 18 tell of the failure of the priests, and Chapters 19 to 21 narrate civil war within Israel. The Book as a whole basically has this one canonical message: Someone in the future must come who will not fail. The book has an overall forward-looking narrative. We need to look at a few important passages.

"After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger" (2:10ff). What happened? They had the Law of Moses. Didn't they read it? If they did read it, did it have no effect on their lives? The problem was partly leadership, which is why the judges were necessary. But it was more than that. It was the people as well (see 2:17). They wouldn't listen to their judges. The sad fact is, it was a spiritual problem, not one that can be explained sociologically. "They didn't know the Lord"! To know the Lord is to be in relationship with Him. To know the Lord is to love Him. So there was no love for God. To know the Lord is to obey Him. So there was neither the desire to obey Him nor the awareness of what was to be obeyed.

The Nation of Israel is repeating Adam's failure. He was tasked with serving God by maintaining and expanding the Garden, but when the Serpent invaded, Adam didn't kill him or evict him, as he should have, but instead succumbed to the Serpent's temptation to do evil. The Nation was to evict the odious pagan people (who were the seed of the Serpent) from the Land God intended to dwell in with His chosen people. Not knowing their Scriptures, they didn't understand their role.

Something else. **"Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and said, 'Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it'"** (2:20ff). Obedience is exceedingly important to God. That's why God sends adversity, to test obedience. Persecution, indeed all opposition to us, is really a test! God wants us to demonstrate our obedience, our faith, our commitment to Him, even if adverse circumstances are necessary to provoke that response. As Adam was tested, so the Nation of Israel. And we today as well. This is heavy! We're here, in a sense, on probation. Will we obey God's Word? Or not.

"The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods . . . the anger of the Lord burned against Israel" (3:5-8). This is why the Church is commanded to not be worldly. Worldliness describes Israel in this era of the Judges, and shame on the Church if worldliness also describes us. The "world" is everything that is not godly, everything not taught or commanded in Scripture. The only way we can be not worldly is if we live out the Word of God. A church that is worldly expresses evil (see 1 John 2:15ff and James 4:4a). We just don't get it! If we're worldly, we're worshiping some other god, not

the God who loved us and saved us and seeks to bless us. We're indulging in Satan's counterfeit creation to satisfy ourselves with all that the Serpent puts on offer.

What's going on here? It's a reprise of the failure in the Garden, at the Golden Calf episode, and at the rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea. And it adumbrates the future terrible rebellion and failure of the monarchy when Israel will be thrown into Exile, as well as the profound failure to recognize their own Messiah and King when He came. But there's more. There's more at issue than just failure.

Israel was called into existence to serve God by taking the knowledge of their Creator God to the rebellious Gentile nations that God had abandoned at the Tower of Babel episode, yet which He continued to love. Their failure was a refusal to serve God as He had intended they should. The refusal to serve God expressed evil. In this cosmos, there are only two options for all living persons: We either live out evil or we live out good. This physical creation is for God to defeat evil so that good, His inherent goodness, alone will prevail. Israel chose to live out evil. Disobedience, refusal to serve God as He commanded, expresses evil. See Deuteronomy 30:15ff (which is really an expansion of Genesis 2:17), "I set before you life and good, or death and evil . . . choose life." Loving God, trusting God, obeying God and serving Him, these are expressions of the choice of life. It seems that Israel didn't have the spiritual ability to choose life. Nevertheless, God's love remains on His chosen people. God knows something we don't: In the future, God will intervene so that Israel will know Him as they should; they will love and obey and serve God, and He will be glorified in them.

The Samson narrative brings Judges to a climax. Samson represents all that the Nation of Israel could have accomplished if they had been faithful and obedient. He also is a type of Christ who is, after all, the personal embodiment of an obedient and faithful Israel. Samson was the child of a faithless family. His father says, "What is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?" (13:12). This is appalling! The answer of course is Torah. But the Word of God was so alien to Israel at this stage that this question was asked. In Chapter 15, the Nation does to Samson what Judah later will do to Jesus, hand Him over to the enemy rather than join Him and be delivered from the enemy. In 16:3 Samson does to the gates of the enemy what Jesus did to the gates of *sheol* at His resurrection, so that everyone now can be raised from the dead. Samson's death is proleptic of the death of Christ and what it accomplished. The Samson narrative, in other words, looks forward to Someone who is to come who will miraculously defeat the enemy and restore Israel. That will be in the future, but He is promised. Between the lines of the text is this lesson: We must – *must* – have Someone supernatural who will make us fit to be with God and take us to God to be blessed. Otherwise, there's only depravity and tragedy.

The final chapters of the book are sordid in the extreme. Chapter 19 reprises Genesis 19, the story of Lot in Sodom. The author is saying that the Nation of Israel had become a Sodom! They not only had not established righteousness in the Land, they'd become Canaanized, and they were destroying . . . themselves. Actually, they were even worse than the Sodomites, because Lot did not actually give his daughters. Here, she was given over to be raped and killed.

The book closes with the sad statement, "**In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.**" Will a king change the people? The lesson of the books on the Monarchy is, No. Well then, will the indwelling Holy Spirit during the Church Age change people? The answer is, Perhaps. The indwelling Spirit can be quenched and grieved, and He then will not change anyone. We must yield to the Spirit AND we must know and live the Word for the Spirit to change us. What about in the future? Will people be changed when God in the Person of the risen, returned Son is physically present, teaching and ruling? No. What then? Only a total re-creation after all evil is eradicated and sin is no more. A miraculous transformation by the Creator God is necessary.

"Everyone did as he saw fit" means they lived as they pleased, apart from the wise teachings and commands of God. There is an unmistakable equivalence between the Nation of Israel during the period of the Judges and modern American Christianity. We today live as we please with only the most trivial reference to the Law of Christ, if even that; yet we're smugly complacent about our spiritual state. If we quench the Holy Spirit, and/or if we don't know the Word so that the Spirit given to empower us has

nothing to work with, we can't be sanctified. We can't be fruitful for God. We're no different from those people back then in Judges.

In Revelation's Chapters 2 and 3, we read of churches that lost their first love; are asleep or lukewarm; or hold to the teachings of Balaam or Jezebel. The Jude and 2 Peter letters address severe problems in the churches. Paul in Acts Chapter 20 anticipated apostasy in the Church. And the Book of Judges was given to us to learn this spiritual law that operates for all time: We serve whom we love. Our service to Christ reveals the depth of our love for God (or lack thereof). We mustn't assume that God's grace in the Gospel means that we're secure in our (modern-day understanding of) belief and can be satisfied with how we pursue life. Jesus will evaluate each of us in the next existence, when it'll be too late to change anything or do anything different. That's why we've been given Scriptures such as this Book of Judges, to teach us and to warn us. We have only this present life to pursue godliness, to serve Christ, to make our lives count.

To conclude, I offer this (perhaps simplistic, but realistic) explanation of Israel's core problem in Judges. They either had no sense of purpose, no awareness of God's exalted purpose in having called them, or they deliberately repudiated it (see Jeremiah 2:20). The Samson story, for example, is undeniably one of abject, inane purposelessness. The same problem, I'm certain, exists with us. If we don't serve Christ as He commanded, to fulfill God's great purposes, we necessarily serve ourselves or other gods. And all manner of apostasy then follows. Complacency and indifference are probably our greatest personal enemies. Let's be sure we're being faithful to our calling.