

JUDGES

WHAT ISRAEL NEEDED

(17:6; 21:25)

The Book of Judges covers the period of time in Israel's history from Joshua to Samuel. It was a dark time. We have often thought of this Old Testament book as a record filled with fantastic deliverances. From that viewpoint, each of the judges in the book was a military hero and should be held up as a great example. However, we need to read it again. In truth, this was a bleak time in Israel's history, characterized by idolatry, immorality, sins of every type, and a lack of leadership.

One sentence holds a significant key to understanding the book: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." This truth is stated twice, in 17:6 and 21:25, and the first half of it is repeated in 18:1 and 19:1. Each time, after the author wrote, "In those days there was no king in Israel," he immediately wrote of something which happened because there was no king of Israel. That "something" was always bad. The practice of doing what is right in one's own eyes is condemned in Deuteronomy 12:8, as it is in Jeremiah 10:23: "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps." People need instruction; they need leadership.

When they left Egypt, the people of Israel were under the powerful leadership of Moses, one of the greatest leaders in history and one of the most spiritual men of all times. Deuteronomy 33:5 even referred to him as a "king." We do not read of a coronation, but Moses certainly served that function as Israel's leader. After Moses, Joshua capably led them. He demonstrated true leadership near the end of his life when he called for the people to put away the gods

that their fathers had served in the lands beyond the river, to refuse the gods of the Amorites, and to serve Jehovah. He said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:14, 15). After Joshua died, Judges 2:10 says, "There arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel." Eventually, there came Samuel, another strong leader. He was a judge and much more. Beyond him, we read of the period of the kings. Between Joshua and Samuel, however, was the period of the judges, a time of weak leadership. As we study this book, we will see this weak leadership and the problems it caused.

LEADERSHIP NEEDED

First Samuel 8, 10, and 12 picture Israel as requesting a king. Those three chapters concern the appointment of Saul as king. Chapter 8 tells how the people came to Samuel and said, "We want a king." Samuel was distressed, but God told him to listen to the people. He said that the people had not rejected Samuel, but God. This response indicates that God did not want them to have an earthly king. Chapter 10 records the coronation. Chapter 12 says more about the kingship of Saul. In every instance when God addressed the issue, He said, "I do not want them to have a king; they are rejecting My leadership altogether and are rejecting My counsel."

In Deuteronomy 17:14ff., however, we find a prophecy concerning the kingship. God did not say, "I will cause this to happen," but He knew that Israel would have kings. Therefore, He told Moses,

When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, "I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me," you shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the Lord has said to you, "You shall never again return that way." Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.

Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left; in order that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

Notice what is described in verses 18 through 20: We might call such a leader a king after God's own heart. Based on this prophecy, I believe that God intended for Israel to have a leader recognized as a king, but he was not to be the type of king that so many of the kings were. He was to be a king after God's own heart.

The request for a king in 1 Samuel 8, 10, and 12 should be seen as the people's rejecting God in a special sense. He saw the people turning away from Him. They wanted to be like the nations around them; they wanted a king who would multiply horses, multiply wives, multiply silver and gold to himself and lead the people away from the Lord.

The people were constantly looking for a king during the period of the judges. They tried many times to make judges into kings. They tried to make Ehud king, and he refused. They tried to make Gideon their king after his deliverance of the nation, but he would not allow it. They made Abimelech king, but he was not king over the entire nation; we find no evidence in the Scriptures that he ever reigned over any area other than Shechem. They tried to convince Jephthah to be their king because he had led them to a terrific victory. Maybe they were painfully aware of the absence of strong leadership.

REPENTANCE NEEDED

The first chapters of Judges provide a setting and describe what was happening in Israel during the time of the judges because there was no king in Israel. Chapters 1 through 16 tell of one recurring pattern, while the book ends with two unusual incidents.

One pattern is repeated in every story of

deliverance: apostasy, punishment, repentance, and deliverance. When the people forgot God and began serving idols, He always sent a foreign power to conquer them. Under oppression, the people would realize their mistake and turn to God in an attitude of repentance. Our great God of mercy would hear those sinful people each time and would send a deliverer. As soon as the people were delivered, they would forget and go back into apostasy, come to punishment, and repent; then God would send another deliverer. Before long, they would again go into apostasy; on and on the pattern went.

How quickly the people would forget! In many instances, even the leader himself forgot God. Gideon is an example of this sad truth. Gideon's story is one of the more familiar ones. He led an army of three hundred men who initially did not even wield the sword. They blew trumpets and broke pitchers, and God so confused the Midianite soldiers and their cohorts that they killed one another. This was a tremendous delivery. What did Gideon do when he returned? When the people wanted him to be their king, he said, "I will not be your king, but I will do this: I will accept the gold earrings as an offering of the spoils." The people gave him the gold trinkets, and he made an idol out of them! Judges 8:27 says, "It became a snare to Gideon and his household." The cycle started again almost before it was finished. This is the picture throughout the Book of Judges—the picture of a nation in a sad spiritual plight.

At the end of the book two unusual narratives are given. One concerns Micah, who lived in Mount Ephraim, the hill country of the region later known as Samaria, located in the northern portion of the land of Manasseh. This story tells of Israelites who were trying to worship God through idolatry (17, 18). The second tells of rape and of civil war (19–21). What are these stories all about? They tell us about the condition of Israel. They illustrate how far into sin the people had gone. Israel had reached the point of civil war. The people needed Samuel, and they needed a king, but a king after God's own heart. Paul, in Acts 13:22, referred to David as a man after God's own heart. Many of the other kings, however, never

sought that which God loves.

GODLINESS NEEDED

As we look at Judges, we will find ourselves asking, "What was a judge?" Today, we think of a judge as a person who presides in a court. He hears cases, sees that court actions are according to judicial procedure, and generally hands down a decision regarding each issue. Is that what we see in this book? We call these leaders judges, and in some instances they did sit in court. Deborah had her own courtroom, which happened to be under a palm tree, and people brought their cases to her from all over the land. Deborah also led the army at least once.

What about Samson? We see no indication that he ever sat in judgment on any issue or that he had the ability to sit in judgment. That was not in his work. He does not appear to have been a completely spiritual man.

What about Jephthah? He had been driven out of town. The people went after him because they needed someone who could fight well and could lead in battle. When he won a tremendous victory, the Ephraimites complained that he had gone to war without including them in it. That was the second time the Ephraimites had complained. The first time they had complained to Gideon, who smoothly convinced them that what they had been doing was more valuable than what he had been doing. They seemed satisfied and went back home. When they complained to Jephthah, however, the results were drastically different. As recorded in chapter 12, Jephthah and his men killed a large number of Ephraimites, their Israelite brothers.

Israel's judges were deliverers; most were simply great military leaders. As we read of the immoral man named Samson, who went to a Philistine prostitute, we wonder about his dedication. We see him, however, as a strong man who responded when God's nation called. In spite of his sinfulness, he was able to kill many Philistines, the enemies of God's people. That is what judges did—they were deliverers. The deliverers led the nation for a brief time, and they were successful in military matters, yet the overall leadership of this era was woefully lacking. This is a major point of the Book of Judges.

OBEDIENCE NEEDED

One of the thorniest problems in the Book of Judges is why the Israelites did not drive out the Canaanites. The book speaks of the problem in the first two chapters and really gives two different answers to it.

Israel's Disobedience

Now the angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their alters.' *But you have not obeyed Me*; what is this you have done? Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you'" (2:1-3; emphasis mine).

Why did the people not drive out the Canaanites? Because God did not drive them out for Israel. The Israelites were not stronger than the people that they were warring against. Remember Gideon's three hundred soldiers against a valley full of Midianites? God won that victory. Israel could win battles and drive out the Canaanites only when they obeyed God and He helped them to be victorious. God said that His people had disobeyed Him; they had already started to make covenants and contracts with these people and had begun to honor their gods. Therefore, God would not help them. The presence of the Canaanites and their gods in the land caused a constant temptation that Israel could have avoided.

In 1:19 the problem is restated: "Now the Lord was with Judah, and they took possession of the hill country; but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley *because they had iron chariots*." (Emphasis mine.) Why could Israel not drive them out? Is God not stronger than iron chariots? The logical explanation is that the people had already started disobeying God; therefore, God did not help them. Without God's help, Israel could not defeat iron chariots.

A Test for Israel

Another answer surfaces. Judges 3:1 says, "Now these are the nations which the Lord

left, *to test Israel* by them. . . ." (Emphasis mine.) What kind of test was God planning? A parenthetical statement in verses 1 and 2 explains, "That is, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly." They had to learn war. That is a horrible thing to have to learn, is it not? Why would God require His people to learn war? Notice 2:1-3, which tells how the people disobeyed Him. God said that He would leave these Canaanites in the land, and they would be a snare. These facts fit together like the pieces of a puzzle. Read 3:4: "And they were *for testing Israel*, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the Lord, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses." (Emphasis mine.) This comment relates to what we read in chapter 2 about their gods' always being a snare. God did not drive out those nations because Israel had started violating their covenant with Him. Without His help, iron chariots or almost anything would keep Israel from being successful in battle. Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites left enemies all around them. Whenever they began to worship the idols which they should have destroyed and whose devotees they should have driven out of the land, there were plenty of enemies to conquer them, to take their sons, daughters, money, and crops. Eventually, they would repent. God could always find a deliverer, but the people kept forgetting the lesson they should have learned.

LESSONS FOR US

God's People Must Not Be Divided

The time of the judges was a time of a divided people. God's people are to be united. God's people are not to fight one another. Whom did Jephthah kill? Ephraimites. In that last story of the book, we read that eleven tribes nearly eradicated the tribe of Benjamin in civil war. Paul said in Galatians 5:15, "But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another." Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Christ's church is not to wage civil war. We are not to bite and devour. There must be a way that Christians can disagree

without destroying one another. We need to study Judges to see how harmful it is when God's people fight one another.

God's People Should Be Grateful

The sin of Israel was the sin of ingratitude. God brought the people out of captivity, delivered them through the Red Sea, took care of them through the wilderness, and gave them a land that flowed with milk and honey. They rewarded Him by worshipping idols. They forgot who He is.

Judges 2:10 says, "And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel." How could the people of Israel not tell their children about God? Think of all He had done for Israel. How could they let their children grow up without knowing that? Theirs was the sin of ungrateful hearts.

What has the Lord done for us? Compare the cross of Jesus Christ with the deliverance from an oppressive nation and the slavery of Egypt. He has done much more for us than He ever did for the nation of Israel. How dare we not serve Him wholeheartedly and pass the message on to our children! To fail to serve Him is to look on all of His gifts with hearts of ingratitude.

God's People Must Have Leaders

The most important lesson for us as we examine the book is that God's people must have spiritual leadership. Where there is no leadership, the people perish. The church will perish without leadership. The home will perish without fathers and mothers who will teach their children about the works of the Lord. We must teach them to know the Lord so that there can never arise in our land a generation that does not know Him and the great work that He has done.

GOD'S INVITATION

If you have not been baptized into Christ, let me plead with you to become His servant. Respond to Him with a heart of gratitude. When faith reaches the point of obedience, you will enter into Christ through baptism and begin a life of service. If you have not been serving Him, stop and look at how bad it was for the people in the Book of Judges not to serve Him. Repent as they repented, and know that God will hear your cry. He is a merciful and

forgiving God.

EXEGETICAL NOTES

17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25—These verses suggest the need for a king. These must be compared with 1 Samuel 8, 10, 12 and with Deuteronomy 17. This was a sad time of inadequate spiritual leadership in Israel.

2:11-23—See the pattern of apostasy, punishment, repentance, and deliverance. The accounts which follow show this pattern.

1:19; 2:1-3; 3:1, 2, 4-7—These Scriptures deal with why Israel did not drive out the Canaanites.

The Faith of the Judges

Several of Israel's judges are listed along with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and other Old Testament heroes in Hebrews 11, the well-known "faith chapter" of the New Testament.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. . . .

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight (Hebrews 11:1, 2, 32-34).

Four of the fifteen judges are included in this list. Each of them had moments in their lives when they demonstrated great faith, and through that faith they gained God's approval (11:39).

Following the listing of faithful men and women, we are admonished by the writer of Hebrews to learn from their examples and to practice a faith such as theirs as we fight our own daily battles against sin:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1, 2).