

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

God, the Judge of Israel – (Judges 1-2) The book of Judges introduces the next phase in this new era of Israelite history. The beginning of the book establishes the relationship between Judges and the book that precedes it in the English Bible, Joshua. The first two chapters create the context that is crucial for understanding the remainder of the book, a context that is begun in the final pages of the book of Joshua as we witness the spiritual apathy of the people of God. The term, *judge* evokes the image of an austere figure seated behind a bench wearing a black robe and ready to dole out judgment; however, this is not the type of judge that is identified in the book at hand. When we read of *judges*, we should think of *saviors*, because they were men (and women) whom God raised up to save his people from the judgment engendered by their disobedience. For the lesson today, we will introduce the book of Judges and offer some overarching comments about the book, and then spend the remainder and most significant amount of time exploring the introduction to the book found in the first two chapters.

The book of Judges can be well summarized by the phrase, “...everyone did what was right in his own eyes...” (21:25). There is a cycle that is more of a downward spiral reoccurring throughout the book. This cycle has been correctly identified by Arthur E. Cundall in four stages: apostasy, servitude, supplication, and deliverance.¹ At any given point throughout the book we can read a portion of the text and identify one of these four stages. To think that this would be the case so soon after the passing of the generation of Conquest, who witnessed the mighty acts of God through the parting of the River Jordan, and the repeated miraculous deliverance of the inhabitants of the land into their hand, is astounding. One cannot read the book and prevent from being overwhelmed by the repetitive rebellion on the part of God’s people, and witness the equally repetitive deliverance of a gracious and loving God. The characters that he uses to bring about this deliverance are not the usual suspects. They are not, for the most part, upright and honorable men. More often than not they are cowards, deceivers, womanizers who are overrun with ulterior motives. God continues to use them in spite of and even through their weakness and sins. One must only think of Samson to know the verity of this statement.

So, if at the end of our time in the book of Judges, we are seeking the clear blue skies of the New Testament, we have allowed the message of the book to take hold of our hearts and point us to the true Judge, the true Savior of our souls. There is only one who can save, and God demonstrated this truth to his people while slaves in Egypt. It is, however, a truth that we are inclined to forget. We all restlessly look for someone to right the wrong, to glue back the broken vase, to put things right again. God’s people were given the greatest gift of all time: God’s own self disclosure by means of his covenant, his word, and his mighty redemptive acts. However, the book of Judges says concerning the generation that succeeded the generation of Conquest, “*And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel*” (2:10b). Allow the sorrow of this statement to set

¹ Cundall, Arthur E. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Judges and Ruth*. Pg. 70
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in and we will be well on our way to developing a redemptive, historical understanding to the story-line of scripture.

Part One: *The Conquest, A Retake?* – The first sentence of chapter one should not be seen as chronological in the sense that all that follows happened after the death of Joshua. Rather, the first sentence should be seen as a title (or subtitle) to the book. The author is letting us know the events that followed the passing of the generation of Conquest and he does so by reaching back into the lifetime of Joshua and rehearsing valuable information. For example, the account of Othniel, Caleb's nephew or younger brother (the text is unclear), taking the City of Kiriath-sepher and capturing it and in return earning the hand of Caleb's daughter in marriage is a repeat of Joshua 15:13-19. It is undeniable due to Joshua's presence in the story that this account transpired when he was yet alive.

On the other hand, the military campaign launched by Judah and Simeon in 1:1-10 seems to be quite different from the accounts of the northern and southern campaigns mentioned in Joshua chapters 10 and 11. The flow of this military account into the succeeding verses: Judges 1:11-15, the text relating the events mentioned above, seems to be seamless. Likewise, the account of the house of Joseph performing similar military exploits in 1:22-26 seems to be a contrast to the campaigns mentioned in Joshua. Some commentaries² find reasonable proof that the accounts here given are more detailed explanations of the same campaigns as referenced in Joshua. Personally, I think the difference behind what started the military endeavors are significant enough to refute this idea. For instance, the southern campaign described in Joshua 10:29-43 seems to have followed the destruction of the five Amorite kings, an event triggered by the attack of this confederacy of kings against the Gibeonites who had endeared the protection of the covenant community. In Judges 1:1b, it is clear that there is some uncertainty among the covenant community as to how they should launch an attack against the Canaanites. What seems more likely is that there is a conscious vacillation on the part of the author between the period preceding the death of Joshua and the time following the death of Joshua. It is not until 2:6-10 that we have a firm line drawn separating the events after Joshua's death from those prior to his death.

Assuming the above explanation is correct, we have here further attempts on the part of Judah, Simeon, and the house of Joseph to militarily drive out the Canaanite inhabitants within their allotted possession. What is truly sad, and indicative of the spiritual decline of the covenant community following the death of Joshua, is the account given in 1:27-34 of all the tribes unable (or unwilling) to drive out the inhabitants of the land. Consequently, the religion of the people of God was plagued with syncretism as the Israelites sought to amicably live among their idolatrous neighbors. For many of these tribes, the Canaanite inhabitants became a source of labor, resulting in an economic reluctance to further obey the command of utter annihilation as well as a growing displacement among the tribes. After all, tribes unable or unwilling to drive out the land's inhabitants encroached into the inheritance of tribes that succeeded in doing so making the fulfillment of the promise of inheriting the land, "...as far as your eye can see..." an unobtainable reality.

Part Two: *The City of Tears* – The failure of God's people to drive out the inhabitants did not go unrequited. Immediately after the disappointing account of Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites

² For example, Michael Wilcock in his commentary on the book of Judges for the Bible Speaks Today series as well as the previously referenced Arthur Cundall, both believe the passages here mentioned were more detailed viewpoints of the same campaigns mentioned in the book of Joshua.
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we read the following: *“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, 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? 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’”* (2:1-3). There are at least three noteworthy points about these verses:

- 1) The first noteworthy point is the identity of the “angel” of the Lord. It is quite possible that the angel of the Lord was simply an angel. It is also suggested that the messenger was human in origin and may have been one of the early judges. This is due to the fact that the Hebrew word for angel, מַלְאָךְ is the same as that for messenger (human or otherwise). However, there is another option, one that I personally think more feasible. The term angel of the Lord or מַלְאָךְ-יְהוָה in Hebrew, is used frequently throughout the OT, to denote God himself, the sacred Trinity as in Genesis 22:11,15; Exodus 3:2; Exodus 14:19; and Exodus 23:20-23. Since the reference to “angel” in Exodus 23:23 specifically references the act of going before God’s people and driving out the inhabitants of the land, and since in other locations God himself is described as going before his people to drive out the Canaanites, it is reasonable to assume that this “being” who pronounces judgment against the people of God for their disobedience is a *theophany*, an appearance of God in the OT.
- 2) The second noteworthy point is the reference to God’s redemptive deeds on behalf of his people, *“... I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to your fathers...”* His redemptive deeds demonstrated his election of his people and occurred within the context of his unconditional covenant with their forefathers. However, as we have already seen from the advent of pronouncing blessings and curses on Mt. Gerizim, the blessings of the covenant (which included possession of the land) were conditioned upon obedience. Likewise, we see here, *“...I said, I will never break my covenant with you, 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?”* God is judging Israel, they have been weighed in the balance and are found wanting. He commanded them not to make covenants or enter into agreements with the inhabitants of the land, but to destroy the relics of their idolatry. Israel failed to obey.
- 3) The third noteworthy point is judgment. Because Israel disobeyed the commands of God and did not utterly drive out the inhabitants of the land, they would be judged. He assures them, *“...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.”* How can we reconcile this reality with the covenantal promise that God’s people would certainly inherit the land and the dominion of God would be portrayed through Israel to the ends of the earth? Are we, as some argue, to look for a time in the future when the full boundaries of the promised land are occupied by Israel and the people live in perfect obedience to God? Should we interpret this to mean that the disobedience of God’s people has caused him to change his mind; the covenant promise of the land made at the time of the visitation of the burning furnace (Genesis 15) is now annulled? If we understand the story of redemption, we will know the answer to this question. God is not unfaithful to his covenantal promises, but Israel would have to wait. Wait through the long period of the judges, experience some reprieve during the reign of King David and his son Solomon, and then experience the unthinkable when they were led away captive to Babylon. No, the delay is not in

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vain. All of salvation history is building to a crescendo, to some point in the future when the glory of the knowledge of the Lord will fill the allotted land originally promised to Abraham and beyond.

Part Three: Judgment & Salvation – It is interesting to note that the angel of the Lord mentioned above, and identified for our purposes as a theophany, an appearance of God to his people traces the journey from Gilgal to Bochim. Remember that Gilgal got its name from the spiritual renewal that happened there in the days of Joshua. After Joshua and the people of God crossed the river Jordan and pitched before Jericho, God commanded the elders to circumcise all their adult males because they had not been circumcised during their time in the wilderness. Circumcision was a sign and seal of the Abrahamic covenant, one of the blessings of which was the inheritance of the land. It is no surprise that the angel used this sight as a starting point. The destination (Bochim) is believed to be near Bethel, the site where Jacob had his dream and anointed the pillar making a vow to worship God if God proved faithful to bring him again into the land of his fathers. The scene is now quite different. God has indeed been faithful, but Israel has not. So, the long trek from the place of covenant renewal to the place of “the house of God” is marked by judgment. It is therefore renamed *Bochim*, which means “those who weep” in Hebrew. God has judged Israel, and he has resolved not to drive out the remaining inhabitants of the land. This sets the perfect stage for the book of Judges. This period begins with judgment, and this judgment is the context for the various saviors that God will raise up among his people.

If we are to understand anything from this book, it should be that God is Israel’s true Judge or Savior. He is the one, and the only one capable of delivering his people from the tumultuous cycle of apostasy and judgment. He does so, time and time again, and each time his people reject him and continue the downward spiral into idolatry and isolation. By the end of the book one has a sense of hopelessness. God’s people have journeyed so far in the opposite direction shirking his dominion and governance that it is difficult to see the characteristics of his kingdom in the world.

However, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Even in judgement, God’s purpose is redemptive. After providing the difficult account of the Lord raising up saviors to deliver his people in 2:16-19, we read, “*So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he said, ‘Behold this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not’*” (2:20-22). Even in judgement, God is gracious. He seeks to redeem and restore his people. The depths of our sin and despair make God’s church (OT and NT alike) self-destructive. It is often the presence of the enemy among us that keeps us (by contrast) grounded in Christ. One only need to think of the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30) to understand the truth of this statement.

Conclusion: Today we have begun our journey through the period of the judges. The foundation has been laid, and we have witnessed how God is the true Judge or Savior of his people. Although he brings judgment, he brings grace, and will rescue, restore, and redeem.