

Sunday School Introduction to Judges
By Josh Mauldin

What is Judges?

Judges, the seventh book of the Old Testament, is a narrative that describes the relationship between Israel and God after they settle in the Promised Land.

Like Joshua, Judges is included in the “Historical Books” in the English Bible, while in the Hebrew Bible it is included in the “Former Prophets.” The author of Judges takes several stories of life in the Promised Land before there was a king over Israel in order to emphasize the spiritual condition of Israel at this time (which will be an example of things to come). He simply describes how God and Israel relate to each other once they are in the Promised Land.

“By classifying Judges as a prophetic work, we acknowledge first, that it addresses a specific historical and religious situation and second, that...the entire work carries a [teaching] agenda. The author’s intent is not to produce a cold, rational, and objective record of events; this is literary rhetoric, the language of persuasion designed to challenge prevailing notions and effect a spiritual and moral transformation in the readers of the composition. The book represents an extended sermon, or a series of sermons....”¹

General Principles for Interpreting Narrative

Think Big Picture

Three Levels of Narrative from *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth*:²

1. Bottom Level: individual stories of any given book
2. Middle Level: the story of Israel
3. Top Level: whole universal plan of God.

“You will not fully do justice to any individual narrative without recognizing its part within the other two.”³

So we start asking ourselves in every lesson, “How does this fit into the story of God’s promises to Israel, and God’s ultimate plan of salvation in Jesus?”

Abraham-Exodus-Promised Land-Judges-King David-Exile-Jesus

“...the author of Judges recognizes that Israel’s special relationship to [God] is based on three important pillars: (1) his status as the God of the patriarchs (2:12); (2) his role as Israel’s deliverer from the bondage of Egypt (2:10, 12); (3) his covenant with Israel at Sinai (2:20).”

¹ Block, Daniel I. Judges, Ruth. New American Commentary, Vol. 6. Pg. 52.

² Fee, Gordon & Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Pg. 79.

³ Fee & Stuart, 80.

“Two-thirds of the promise made with Abraham had been fulfilled: Israel enjoyed a large population, and they inhabited the land of Canaan. But would they bless the whole world? Would the universal blessing promised to Abraham become a reality through them?”⁴

“The Book of Judges describes a nation in transition and crisis.”⁵

Watch for connections to previous stories of God’s work for Israel

- a. In particular for Judges, you have to consider the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy, the covenant renewed at the end of Joshua.
- b. The men of Gibeah 19:22-26 and Sodom & Gomorrah
- c. Gideon’s battle and the battle of Jericho

Remember God is the Hero and Main Character

This helps us avoid moralizing the Biblical stories or misapplying promises to our context.

If there was every a book in the Bible to avoid making moral examples of it’s main characters, it is Judges.

“Far from being agents of spiritual change, the deliverers demonstrated repeatedly that they were a part of the problem rather than a solution. ...Far from distinguishing themselves as paragons of virtue and faith, the deliverers tended to be the antithesis. In fact, the judges were the opposite of charismatic leaders, if by the expression we mean those naturally gifted and spiritually qualified for a task. ...In other words, the Book of Judges is not so much a written memorial to Israel’s heroes in the Early Iron Age as a witness to [God’s] gracious determination to preserve his people by answering their pleas and providing deliverance.”⁶

“The true hero in the book is God and God alone.”⁷

So we are asking “What is God doing in this passage, and what does this show me about the character and work of God?”

“**Gideon** was a most unlikely leader. He recognized that he was from the weakest clan in Manasseh, and that he was the least honored among his father’s children (6:15). The key to victory was the Lord had sent him and promised to be with him, just as he sent Moses and was with him (6:14, 17).”⁸

⁴ Schreiner, Thomas R. *The King in His Beauty*. Pg. 117.

⁵ Block, 37.

⁶ Block, 40.

⁷ Block, 72.

⁸ Schreiner, 121.

“The Lord underscores that the victory is his, for Gideon’s army of twenty-two thousand is whittled down to three hundred in order to show that military prowess could not account for Israel’s victory (7:1-8). Gideon wins because [the Lord] gave Midian into his hand (7:9, 14-15).”⁹

“The core narrative reaches its climax in the story of **Samson**, who embodies all that is wrong with Israel.”¹⁰

“As Wong points out, Samson falls for foreign women like Israel falls for foreign gods.”¹¹

Watch for clues from the author that give you the “point” of the story/stories

Guidelines for interpreting Historical Narrative from *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*.¹²

- a. *Editorial Comments.*
- b. *Thematic Statements.*
- c. *Repetition*
 - a. In Judges a pattern will play a key role in understanding the book.

Purpose of Judges

The purpose of Judges is to show Israel’s continual disobedience to and rejection of God after settling in the Promised Land. And yet, God continues to save his people and deliver them from their enemies.

Judges 2:10b-14, 16-20a “And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. ... Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were

⁹ Schreiner, 122

¹⁰ Block, 48.

¹¹ Schreiner, 124 citing Wong, *Book of Judges*, pg. 232.

¹² Plummer, Robert. *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*. Pg. 194.

more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.”

“Would the universal blessing promised to Abraham become a reality through them? The book of Judges dashes any hopes that worldwide blessing would come anytime soon through Israel.”¹³

“The book of Judges begins the story of the way Israel was unable to serve [the Lord] in the Land of Promise, the new Eden.”¹⁴

“[Judges] represents a call to return to the God of the covenant, whom the people have abandoned in favor of the virile and exciting fertility gods of the land. The theme of the book is the *Canaanization of Israelite society during the period of settlement*. The author’s goal in exposing the problem is to wake up his own generation. This is an appeal to the covenant people to abandon all forms of paganism and return to [the Lord]. In doing so the author provides a profound commentary on the grace of God. Left to their own devices the Israelites would surely have destroyed themselves. Only by the repeated gracious intervention of God do they emerge from the dark pre-monarchic period as a separate people and nation.”¹⁵

Every story we encounter in Judges is there to prove the case that Israel repeatedly rejects and disobeys God, and yet God continues to save them. As you teach Judges you are attempting to show how each story reflects and proves this theme.

What are Judges?

Judges 2:16, 18 “Then the Lord raised up judges, who would save them out of the hand of those who plundered them. ...Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge.”

“These individuals were instruments of deliverance from external enemies; their purpose was not the settlement of internal disputes.”¹⁶

“Block argues that the judges are fundamentally saviors and deliverers. Hence their fundamental role should be described as soteriological [that is, saving] rather than legal or judicial.”¹⁷

Many judges are included in the book. The author simply lists some, while he tells extended stories of others. These are distinguished as primary judges (those of whom we

¹³ Schreiner, 117.

¹⁴ Hamilton, James M. *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*. Pg. 154

¹⁵ Block, 58.

¹⁶ Block, 23.

¹⁷ Schreiner, 120.

hear their stories of saving Israel) and secondary (those that are simply mentioned or listed). The author does not distinguish primary and secondary judges based on the length of their leadership or any other given reason. The stories recounted are those that best prove the point of the theme of the book.

Structure of Judges

Outline

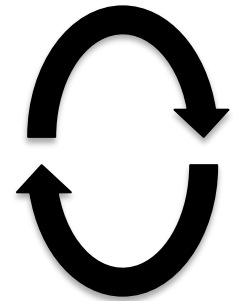
- I. Prologue
 - a. Background or Underlying Cause of Israel's Sin: Failure to Drive out the Canaanites from the land. (1:1-2:5)
 - b. Introduction: Cycle of Apostasy (2:6-3:6)
- II. Cycles: "The Israelites Did Evil in the Eyes of the Lord"
 - a. Othniel (3:7-11)
 - b. Ehud (3:12-31)
 - c. Deborah (4-5)
 - d. Gideon (6-8)
 - i. Abimelech (9)
 - ii. Tola and Jair (10:1-5)
 - e. Jephthah (10:6-12:7)
 - i. Ibzan (12:8-10)
 - ii. Elon :12:11-12)
 - iii. Abdon (12:13-15)
 - f. Samson (13-16)
- III. Epilogue: The Depth of Depravity in Israel
 - a. Danites (17-18)
 - b. Benjaminites (19-21)¹⁸

Two Keys

1. Cycle of Rebellion-Savlation-Rebellion

We see a clear repetition and pattern throughout the main body of the story, this cycle of rebellion that was introduced in 2:11-20.

- a. "Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (3:7, 12; 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1)
- b. The Lord gives them to an enemy (3:8, 12; 4:2, 6:1, 10:7, 13:1)
- c. Israel cries out to the Lord (3:9, 15; 4:3, 6:6-7, 10:10-16)
- d. The Lord hears and sends Judge to save Israel (3:9, 15; 4:4-9, 10:10-16)
- e. Israel has rest (3:11, 30; 5:1, 8:30)
- f. Repeat.¹⁹

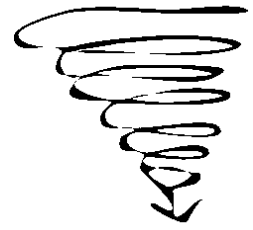


¹⁸ Hill, Andrew E. & John H. Walton. *A Survey of the Old Testament*. Pg. 195. Also, Block, 58.

¹⁹ Hamilton, 155-156.

2. Downward Spiral

Not only is Israel caught in a cycle of rebellion but they also get worse as the cycle continues.



“The people do not cry to [the Lord] in the account of Samson, which seems to indicate that the nation is getting progressively worse. ...The fact that Jephthah and Samson do not give the land rest points again to the worsening of Israel’s state.”²⁰

“This spiritual degeneracy is accompanied by increasingly depraved moral behavior as is evidenced especially by the final episode involving the violence toward the Levites’ concubine (19:22-20), and the “daughters of Shiloh” (21:19-24).”²¹

Major Themes

Israel’s Sin-see above.

God’s Salvation & Mercy

If there’s anything more amazing than Israel’s continual sin, it is God’s continual salvation.

“The author seems to be tracing the nation’s decline in order to demonstrate the justice of God’s punishment of Israel’s sin, and the horror of the flagrant sinfulness of Israel makes [the Lord’s] patient mercy shine all the more brightly.”²²

“What is remarkable, however, is the mercy of [the Lord]. Israel’s continued unfaithfulness and disobedience warranted irrevocable judgment, and yet the Lord delivers Israel, when they repent and cry out for mercy, again and again.”²³

“The message emphasized [the Lord’s] longsuffering grace in the face of continual and rampant apostasy and injustice among his people. Covenant failures of the people were met by covenant faithfulness from the Lord.”²⁴

Need for a King

In the story line (particularly the middle level), we see the need for a king to lead the people to lasting devotion to the Lord. At the end of the book we see the refrain “There was no king in Israel (17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 20:25). Schreiner says this refrain “appears at key junctures in the narrative and functions as a resounding conclusion to the book.”²⁵

²⁰ Hamilton, 156.

²¹ Block, 39.

²² Hamilton, 158.

²³ Schreiner, 120.

²⁴ Hill & Walton, 196.

²⁵ Schreiner, 125.

“Indeed the final editor of this book associates the deterioration of Israelite society with the absence of a centralized authority.”²⁶

“Israel’s king was to refrain the evil of the people by enforcing the law of [the Lord], just as Deuteronomy 17:18-20 stipulates. As Dempster puts it, “Israel is in need of lasting kingship instead of a temporary judge.”²⁷

Application

**Remember the three levels and that God is the hero.
Connect the stories to New Testament teaching.**

How do we see the Judges?

We do have to reconcile that these Judges, of whom we have said so many negative things, are cited in Hebrews 11 as examples of faith. This does not undo anything we have said about them. Overall, they had significant flaws in faith and action. They are not given a pass on any of this. However, they were used by God and in that sense were examples of faith.

“The message is that if anything positive was accomplished during the dark days of the judges, it was the work of God. The human tools available within Israel were raw, and their characters reveal many flaws. But God’s work had to be done; again and again the nation needed deliverance from external enemies. Despite defects of personality and lack of nerve, the deliverers stepped out against overwhelming odds. This was either the mark of folly or of faith. The author of Hebrews is correct in casting his vote with the latter.”²⁸

“The weakness of the judges may lead us to think they are fundamentally failures, but the [New Testament] actually confirms the main story that we read in Judges itself. The judges trusted in God and acted on that trust and thereby delivered Israel from its enemies.”

I probably see the judges more negatively than this.

God’s true Salvation

God’s temporary salvation through flawed Judges should point us to God’s ultimate salvation in His perfect Son. As we saw above the answer is not a judge. But the answer is not an earthly king either, instead it is Jesus.

“The faults of judges whom [the Lord] raised up to deliver Israel indicate that Israel needed a king—a man after God’s own heart. ...Clearly the judges are not the final saviors of Israel. ...Surely, David is in view here, but David shares the same faults to

²⁶ Block, 36.

²⁷ Hamilton, 157.

²⁸ Block, 70.

some extent as the judges, and so ultimately the book points to the arrival of one greater than David—Jesus the Christ. He is the savior of Israel and the world, and he is the true king whom Israel needs.”²⁹

Further, we see that God is fulfilling his plan. And just as God fulfilled his plan for Israel, he fulfilled his universal plan of salvation.

“In the final analysis, God cannot let his program abort. The mission of grace to the world depends upon preservation of his people. So against all odds, and certainly against Israel’s deserts, the nation survives the dark days of the judges.”³⁰

Jesus alone brings the final promise to Abraham. The universal blessing of salvation comes through Jesus and faith in Him. Israel failed to be the blessing in Judges, in fact they bring about more curse. This only changes with Jesus.

Galatians 3:13-14 “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

2 Corinthians 1:20 “For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Jesus].”
-Not Gideon, Jephthah, or Samson.

Life as the People of God

When we read and teach Judges, we should know our need for a savior. We should identify with Israel as they recognize their sin and ask for deliverance. However, we should also look to avoid the ultimate cycle of failure and avoid Israel’s mistakes of conforming to a surrounding culture. No matter our time, God calls his people to be distinct from non-believers.

“Evidences of the ‘Canaanization’ of the church are everywhere: our preoccupation with material prosperity, which turns Christianity into a fertility religion; our syncretistic and aberrant forms of worship; or refusal to obey the Lord’s call to separation from the world; our divisiveness and competitiveness; our moral compromises, as a result of which Christians and non-Christians are often indistinguishable.”³¹

God not only saves but sets apart his people.
-major theme in 1 Peter, 1 Corinthians, and Titus.

²⁹ Schreiner, 122. 125.

³⁰ Block, 72.

³¹ Block, 71.