

Theme. The theme of the history book Judges is surely in its cycles. The people forget the Lord, then the nation of Israel sins, then God brings due punishment, and finally the nation repents, restoring relationship, until the people forget again. Judges illustrates the human condition without a savior, without rescue: try as we might, we cannot sustain the kind of holiness that a just and perfect God rightly demands. Our hearts bend instead toward compromise, sensuality, indulgence, until we find no character within ourselves with which to stop the cycle. Without salvation, the weary cycle simply continues, except that the cycle is more of a downward spiral than merely a repeated circle. Each cycle adds depth and breadth to human depravity until humankind has no hope of recovery. God, it seems, must wipe humankind from the earth's face, as he did with Noah's flood, except that then God promised never again to do so. The cycle theme of Judges is cautionary, even depressing, except that its flawed deliverers, styled as *judges*, point forward to our perfect Savior.

Author. Judges covers a span of approximately two- to three-hundred years from Joshua's death forward, and so from sometime in the 1300s or 1200s B.C. to Saul's anointing as king, attributed to 1051 B.C. The book Judges does not identify its author, but the Talmud credits the prophet Samuel, who was the last judge, to be the book's author, up to the book's account of Samuel's death. The prophets Nathan and Gad may have written the latter part of Judges recording events following Samuel's death. Choosing an author like Samuel, who lived during the book's latter events into the early reign of Israel's first king, makes sense because of Judges' indirect contrasts, repeated several times, of Israel under the judges to Israel under a king, that "in those days Israel had no king." In any case, Judges was surely extant more than a thousand years before Christ, leaving no question of its ancient authorship during or near the events it records.

Context. Judges serves as a narrative bridge from Joshua's conquering leadership to Israel's first kings Saul and then David. Joshua, of course, led Israel into possession of the promised land, a glorious time in Israel's history. On the other side of Judges, kings Saul, David, and his son Solomon similarly led Israel to a high point in its national history, dominating the Middle East if not also the world's stage. What Judges records in between is a very different but equally or more significant national history, one that the prior and subsequent high points only accentuate, which is Israel's cycles of increasing depravity. Israel would continue that pattern of depravity-to-repentance-to-depravity in the centuries following the time of the judges, until the hundreds of years of post-exile silence awaiting the coming of Israel's one true King, the King of kings. Read the increasing horrors of

Judges as confirmation of Israel's need and our need for the Messiah, our Lord and Savior Jesus.

Structure. Judges first introduces the book's theme that Israel would respond to God's blessing not with obedience but with forgetfulness and sin, then suffering punishment, leading to repentance. Judges 2:10 begins that "another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done." Verse 2:14 follows that God handed Israel over to their enemies, as a result of which, verse 3:9 shows, Israel "cried out to the Lord," and "he raised up for them a deliverer." From chapters three through sixteen, Judges then documents twelve imperfect but effective deliverers, or judges, whom the Lord raised to rescue and restore Israel. Among them are Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. Judges' narrative is likely not strictly chronological. Various judges' tenures may have coincided in different regions of Israel or overlapped, and passages in Judges likely reflect on the culture of earlier tenures. The book's last five chapters, though, show Israel in yet further moral decline. No judge had succeeded in rallying the nation for more than temporary restoration, and no judge had broken the cyclical pattern nor reversed its downward spiral. Israel needed a perfect Savior, not a series of flawed leaders.

Key Events. Key events occur at Judges' beginning and end, initiating and then putting an exclamation point on Israel's troubling history during that period. Joshua's death opens Judges in a passage repeated from the prior book. Judges also opens with an ominous warning from the angel of the Lord that the Israelites had not destroyed their enemies' places of worship, so that now their gods would trap the Israelites. Judges ends with the prophet Samuel's anointing of Israel's first king Saul. In between, Judges records remarkable stories of deliverance. The left-handed Ehud killed the fat oppressing king of Moab. The prophet Deborah led a reluctant Israelite commander into victory over Sisera, whom a woman killed, confirming the commander's weakness. Gideon emerged from hiding in a winepress to conquer the oppressing Midianites with his trumpets. The angel of the Lord appeared to Samson's parents, announcing the coming conception and birth of the incredibly strong, long-haired deliverer. In a last fatal show of tremendous strength, Samson avenged his Philistine defeat at the hands of his betrayer Delilah. Horrific depravity, such as the murder of the Levite's concubine and distribution across Israel of her body parts, intersperses these rescues. Read these and other remarkable accounts in Judges for their stark illustrations of human despair, when apart from God.

Key Locations. The up-and-down accounts in Judges occur across the breadth of Israel. The book takes the reader to many locations, none of them of significantly greater import than any other. Indeed, the wide distribution of battle and rescue locations is Judges' point. In conquering the promised land, the Israelites had failed

to do as God had commanded, which was to rid the land of its altars to other gods and the people with whom the Israelites would inevitably intermarry. The story of Judges is thus temptation from all quarters, not a single high place, with falls, depravity, and battles everywhere, not at a special strategic location. Locations that Judges mention are nonetheless of interest, like Bokim, a lost location thought perhaps to be Bethel, where the angel of the Lord appeared to Israel. The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon under the oak at Ophrah, northwest of Bethel, where Gideon's son Abimelek would later kill all but one of his seventy brothers. The Levite coaxed his concubine back to him from her home in Bethlehem. Judges sets its accounts in many well-known and little-known or even lost locations, consistent with its theme of despairing cycles everywhere.

Revelation of Christ. One might see the prefigured Christ, our one Savior, in Judges' many heroic-but-flawed deliverers like Othniel, Gideon, Shamgar, Ehud, and Samson. Yet the flaws of those deliverer heroes, violent form of their deliverance, and brevity of their deliverance, discourage such comparisons. Instead, Judges may reveal Christ more in its dramatic demonstration of the need for his transformative deliverance. Judges points to the urgent need for Israel to break its cycles. The period of the judges proved to Israel that it needed a king. While Israel would later anoint flawed king after flawed king, much as it had accepted one after another flawed judges, Judges turned Israel's history toward the King of kings. Read Judges as that turning point, as proof of our need for the true Savior Jesus.

Application. Judges makes no pretense of hiding its life lessons. Judges 2:10 makes clear that we must remember the Lord always, if we are to remain in his gracious protection and blessing. To forget God is to fall into temptation leading to depravity, when God disciplines and, if they fail to repent, rejects the depraved. God disciplines those whom he loves, Hebrews 12:5-11 reassures us. And so, we should set down markers, create memorials, to foster remembrances of God's actions, comforts, blessings, rescues, and provisions. Let our focus be on the Lord, relying on him, trusting him, honoring him, and above all following him in embrace of his kingdom. Let us look, too, to the Lord's return, for the full deliverance of his people and the redemption of all things. Judges shows us our despair without him, when we have no need of despairing, instead embracing his gracious invitation.

Memory Verses. 2:3: *"I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you."* 2:10: *After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.* 6:17: *"If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me."* 13:18: *"Why*

do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding.” 21:25: In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.