

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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SESSION FIVE JUDGES

1. Judges

The Leaders of Israel

Reading: Judges 1:28; 2:7-23; 3:1-7

2. Rebellion

Breaking God's Law

Reading: Judges 4:4, 14-15, 17b-21; 6:1, 6-16, 36-40; 7:1-9, 16-21

3. Repetition

The Pattern of Law Breaking Continues

*Reading: Judges 13:1-3, 24-25a; 15:20; 16:4-5, 11-12, 15-30;
1 Samuel 3:1-3, 8-10; 4:1, 3-4, 10-11, 12-14, 17-19, 21-22*

4. Ruth

Ruth and her Redeemer

*Reading: Ruth 1:1-5, 8, 16-19a; 2:1-2, 8-12, 15, 19-20, 3:1-2, 4, 7-11;
4:13-17*

Discussion questions:

Is there a sense in which God has raised up 'charismatic leaders' (judges) throughout history?

Do we repeat the mistakes of others?

1. Judges

The Leaders of Israel

Reading: Judges 1:28; 2:7-23; 3:1-7

In the lifetime of Joshua, the great leader who succeeded Moses, the Israelites had entered the land of Canaan, with the command to conquer it completely. Just before his death, Joshua had led the people in renewing the covenant with the Lord. Then he sent them away to finish occupying the land but the wars of occupation were incomplete. Instead, the Israelites exploited the Canaanites by pressing them into forced labour. 'Canaanites' applies to all the peoples found in the land of Palestine. These tribes included the Philistines, who lived in five cities, Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron. During the lifetime of Joshua and other leaders who outlived him, Israel was relatively faithful to the Lord. These men had experienced God's great miracles on behalf of Israel but after they had died, Israel easily drifted into compromise with their Canaanite neighbours.

In our culture, when we think of a 'judge' we tend to think of an older person, normally a man, with a wig and colourful robes. In the chaotic period between the death of Joshua and the accession of Saul (Israel's first king), when people often did what they considered right in their own eyes, the judges were charismatic leaders, raised up by God to preside over the affairs of the Hebrew people (Joshua 2:16). Not all the judges were military leaders and not all the judges were men (Deborah being the notable exception), but they all administered the laws and rites of the Lord over the people of Israel who seemed to find it difficult to grasp that the Lord was a divine and invisible king.

There are 12 judges listed in the Old Testament book that we call 'Judges' and two mentioned in the book that we call 1 Samuel. Of the 12 judges, only five have much written about them. In order, these are Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. These are followed by Eli and Samuel. We will consider Ehud and Jephthah briefly and Deborah, Gideon and Samson in more detail before mentioning Eli and his successor, Samuel.

Ehud (Judges 3) was a judge who fought against the Moabite coalition led by King Eglon. Ehud carried a specially made double-edged sword and, being left-handed, concealed this sword on his inner right thigh where it would not be suspected. When he was called upon to present Israel's annual tribute to King Eglon, Ehud told the king he had a secret message for him. The king dismissed his attendants whereupon Ehud ran him through with the sword. The king was so fat that the sword disappeared into the wound and Ehud left it there. After this, the Moabite army was routed and there was peace with Moab for 80 years.

The traditional reading of the story of Jephthah is probably one of the most distasteful stories in the Bible. Jephthah (Judges 11) led the Israelites in battle against the Ammonites but, as he was doing so, he made a rash vow, "whatever comes to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering" (Judges 11:31). When the victorious Jephthah is met by his only child, his daughter, he appears to carry out his vow, even though this is a cross violation of God's law. There is a possibility, however, that an accurate translation of the text might be "whatever comes to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's *or* I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering" possibly meaning that, in the case of Jephthah's daughter, she would be devoted to a consecrated life of prayer and service, at the entrance to the tent of meeting, neither marrying nor having children. There is always a danger in choosing an easier reading of the text but this reading might explain why Jephthah's daughter asked for a two month period of mourning that she will never marry rather than to contemplate her impending death. In any event, human sacrifices were not approved in the Old Testament and, if the traditional reading and interpretation is correct, we can only add the observation that the Bible tells the story without comment and it would serve to show only the state of moral decadence in Israel at the time.

2. Rebellion

Breaking God's Law

Reading: Judges 4:4, 14-15, 17b-21; 6:1, 6-16, 36-40; 7:1-9, 16-21

Before his death, Moses instructed the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites, to avoid inter-marriage with them and to shun the worship of the Canaanite gods. These commands had the purpose of preserving the religious purity of Israel, the covenant nation, as well as executing well-merited divine wrath (Genesis 15:16). God commanded that the altars of Baal and the Asherah poles of the Canaanite fertility cult should be taken down and burned. The Israelites loss of incentive to possess the whole land and consequent mixed marriages led either to syncretism (that is a confusing of religious beliefs and practices) or the notion that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was just one god in a pantheon of gods. Yet because of Israel's place in the divine plan for the redemption of the world, its dedication and uncorrupted purity are important.

In the time of the judges, women played an important role and Deborah, a prophetess and a judge, was the most outstanding of them, though her prominence does imply a lack of suitable men. God commanded Deborah to challenge her general, Barak, to confront Sisera's army, a man who had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for 20 years (Judges 4:3). Barak agreed to this on the condition that Deborah went with him (Judges 4:9) but although Deborah agreed she told Barak that a woman would now kill Sisera. In the battle, as it rained, the Lord's control of the forces of nature showed his superiority over Baal, the Canaanite storm god (Judges 5:4-5).

Sisera decided to take refuge with the Kenites, whom he expected to be friendly and welcoming. Accepting the hospitality of Jael, Sisera fell into a deep sleep. The work of putting up and taking down tents was normally assigned to women and Jael used this skill by nailing Sisera's head to the ground, hammering her tent peg through his temple. Following the death of Sisera, the power of the Canaanite king, Jabin, was destroyed and his capital, Hazor, was taken.

The story of Gideon is the longest in the book of Judges. Under the inspiring leadership of Gideon, the Israelites won a victory even more astonishing than that of Deborah and Barak. Following 40 years of peace brought about by Deborah's victory, Israel's sinfulness (Judges 6:1) left them at the mercy of the Midianites for seven years but in their distress the Israelites cried out to the Lord (Judges 6:7) and God answered by raising up Gideon, a mighty warrior. Very unsure of himself and of God's command, Gideon requested proof of God's will by two miracles, performed on consecutive nights and the exact opposite of each other (Judges 6:36-40).

Gideon assembled an army to face the Midianite hordes. Already outnumbered four to one, God reduced the army further to eliminate any ground for human boasting. Firstly, the cowardly were allowed to return home (Judges 7:3), an opportunity which two-thirds took. Then, the remaining 10,000 men were sifted down to 300 by the way they drank water. It is difficult to say whether the 300 displayed greater alertness by staying on their feet but by this method of selection Gideon was left with a fraction of his original army. Nevertheless, Gideon, assured of the presence of God, was ready to lead these men in an historic battle in which the Israelites' main weapons were surprise and noise. Convinced that a powerful army had surrounded them, in the confusion, the Midianites began fighting among themselves, shouting and trying to escape. The Israelites then pursued the Midianites winning a decisive victory with two of their leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, being killed.

After their great victory, the Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us - you, your son and your grandson - because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian." But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you" (Judges 8:22-23). After the defeat of the Midianites, there was peace in Israel for 40 years during the life of Gideon but as soon as Gideon died of old age, the Israelites, sadly and yet all too predictably, turned again to idolatrous worship.

3. Repetition

The Pattern of Law-Breaking Continues

Reading: Judges 13:1-3, 24-25a; 15:20; 16:4-5, 11-12, 15-30;
1 Samuel 3:1-3, 8-10; 4:1, 3-4, 10-11, 12-14, 17-19, 21-22

Between the days of Joshua and Samuel, Israel continually fell into moral and spiritual disaster. After Joshua and his contemporaries had died, the new generation did not know God in a living and vital way. They had not seen all that their fathers had witnessed. It is a reminder that there are no spiritual children or grandchildren as each generation must experience the reality of God personally. In further generations of Israelites, the pattern of law-breaking was repeated many times. Seven times the book of Judges records that 'the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD' (Judges 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). Israel sinned by deserting the very God who had delivered them from Egypt and by breaking God's commandments and worshipping Baal (the Canaanite storm god, associated with rain and agriculture) or the Ashtoreths, including deities such as Astarte, the goddess of the evening star, a goddess of fertility, love and war. As a consequence, the people were disciplined through military defeats at the hands of an army.

Under this discipline, Israel repented and cried out to God for deliverance. In answer to Israel's cry, God raised up a highly gifted leader (a judge) to turn the people back to him and deliver Israel from the hands of its oppressors. This deliverance would endure for the life of that particular judge. This fivefold pattern is sometimes labelled, 'sin', 'slavery', 'supplication', 'salvation' and 'silence'. The recurring theme shows the danger of apostasy and the misery that comes from forsaking a Holy God. If the Israelites had been stiff-necked in the wilderness, they were even more obstinate in the Promised Land. Nevertheless, God's sovereign and saving power is still very much in evidence.

The last of the 12 judges in the book of Judges is Samson, whose life was a strange mixture of strength and weakness. Samson was blessed with a sound mind and a strong body but more than this he was moved by the Spirit of God (Judges 13:25). Samson led Israel for 20 years in the days of the Philistines (Judges 15:20). The Philistines had lived in Palestine since the time of Abraham and became both warlike and powerful. While the Philistines were not listed among the seven nations of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7:1-3), the same objections given there also applied to the Philistines. They were foreigners whose idolatry would lead their spouses astray. Despite this, Samson had a fatal weakness for Philistine women and because of her closeness to Philistine territory and contact with the Philistine leaders, we can justifiably conclude that Delilah was a Philistine woman. The Philistine leaders were determined to find out the secret of Samson's strength and bribed Delilah to betray Samson. After Delilah persisted in her attempts to discover Samson's secret, instead of breaking his relationship with Delilah, he allowed the relationship to break him. After his hair had been cut, the capture, blinding, imprisonment and forced-labour of Samson complete his downfall and humiliation. As Samson's hair grew again, he was able to use his strength to cause the Temple of Dagon to collapse on his captors, killing them all.

The first book of Samuel describes two further judges, Eli and Samuel. Samuel's mother, Hannah, had dedicated the boy to God and he served in the temple with Eli. God spoke to the boy who, at first, though it was Eli calling him. Eli realised that it was God speaking and told Samuel to be ready, no doubt not thinking for one moment that it would be a message of judgment against Eli.

In their conflict with the Philistines, the Israelite elders decided to bring the ark of the covenant into the camp to guarantee the Lord's presence with his people. What they failed to realise was that this would not assure an Israelite victory, in fact the Israelites suffered a catastrophic defeat and the ark was captured. This shocking news caused Eli to fall off his chair, break his neck and die. When his daughter-in-law heard the news about the death of her husband as well as the death of Eli, she gave birth to a premature child and named him Ichabod, meaning 'the glory has departed' (1 Samuel 4:21). Only after a period of judgment would the Philistines decide to return the ark of the covenant to Israel.

4. Ruth

Ruth and her Redeemer

Reading: Ruth 1:1-5, 8, 16-19a; 2:1-2, 8-12, 15, 19-20, 3:1-2, 4, 7-11;
4:13-17

Set in the time of the judges, the Book of Ruth does not deal with the major events or the institutions in Israel's history but with the problems and concerns of a single family in Bethlehem. The story begins in a time of famine, a regular occurrence in Palestine where crops were dependent on rainfall in its proper season. The severity of the famine caused a certain man and his family to leave their home in Bethlehem and journey to Moab. However, while the family was in Moab, Elimelech died and so did his two sons, leaving three widows, Naomi, Orpah and Ruth.

At that time, it was very difficult for a woman to be left without a husband even in her own community, but extremely perilous in a foreign land. A childless widow could seek to marry her late husband's brother but when Naomi set out for home with her two widowed daughters-in-law, knowing the prospects of such marriage were remote, she decided to release them from the obligation of returning to their late husband's father's house, telling them to return to their mother's house instead (Ruth 1:8). Orpah accepted that offer but Ruth pledged herself to Naomi, her people and her God (Ruth 1:16).

Back in Bethlehem, Naomi sought the protection of Boaz, a man of standing and a relative of her late husband. Ruth asked that Naomi allow her to go into the fields to pick up any leftover grain, a right afforded to poor people known as 'gleaning'. This was not a lucrative opportunity as a hard day's work under the hot sun frequently netted only a small amount of grain. Nevertheless, Ruth gained permission from Boaz to glean in his field and gained his approval. Boaz told her to work with the other servant girls, assured that none of his men would molest her, and with the invitation to help herself to water. Boaz also told his men to make sure that there was plenty of grain for Ruth to pick up.

When Ruth returned to Naomi she was able to show her the generous fruits of her labour. Naomi pointed out not only that Boaz was a close relative but also that he was a kinsman-redeemer who could preserve the name of Ruth's late husband by marrying the widow. On Naomi's advice, Ruth continued to work in his fields.

No indication is given as to how long Ruth continued to glean in these fields. Naomi still wanted to find a settled home for Ruth, where she would be well provided for. Boaz was a relative but not the nearest relative but Naomi interpreted his kindness to Ruth as an indication of his favourable disposition towards her daughter-in-law and perhaps his willingness to undertake responsibilities for Ruth as a kinsman. Knowing that Boaz was going to winnow barley at the threshing floor that same night, Naomi devised a plan whereby he might know of Ruth's willingness to marry him.

After a day's work, Boaz ate and drank, was happy and contented and went to sleep. Ruth entered the threshing floor quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. When Boaz suddenly awoke he discovered a woman lying at his feet but in the darkness he would not immediately have known that it was Ruth. On being discovered, Ruth told Boaz that he was a kinsman-redeemer and asked him to spread a corner of his garment over her, an indication that he would take responsibility for her, if not marry her. It seems that Boaz was rather older than Ruth and that he was flattered at what he interpreted as Ruth's request for marriage. He assured her that all would know there was nothing wrong in the fact that Ruth had come to him with the request to marry him. In time, Ruth was blessed not only with a husband but also with a son, an ancestor of King David.

The story of Ruth is about the providence of God, who is active in the lives of ordinary people, working his purposes out and blessing those who trust him. Ruth is a living illustration of the blessings that God showers upon those who live in faithful obedience.