

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 6 – Judge Deborah
Judges 1-5

Introduction

The book of Judges covers the first 350-400 years of Israel's history after they settled into the Promised Land. Their *purpose* as a nation was to be a “*kingdom of priests among all the nations*” (*Exodus 19:5,6*), representing God to the rest of the world. Sadly, however, Israel's witness to the nations was compromised from the outset as they quickly adopted the religious practices of the Canaanites that remained among them. As a result of their failure to obey God and fulfill their true purpose, God allowed Israel to be oppressed over and over again by other nations. Under the weight of oppression, Israel would repeatedly cry out to God for forgiveness and deliverance. Thus, God raised up “judges” – leaders empowered to rescue Israel from their oppressors. While the stories of these individual judges are very interesting and impactful, the broader message of the book of Judges is more sobering: Israel failed to fulfill her part in the covenant with Yahweh and, as consequence, experienced all of the curses that were promised (Deuteronomy 27,28). By the end of the book, there was total spiritual anarchy in Israel, as “*every man did what was right in his own eyes*” (*Judges 21:25*). Thus, the title *Chaos* seems fitting for this section of the Bible.

Further conquests led by the tri be of Judah: 1:1-26

After the death of Joshua, much territory *within* the land remained to be conquered. The question arose: WHO would lead Israel in war, now that Joshua was dead? The answer came from God: The tribe of Judah would lead the charge. Judah would later become the tribe through which Messiah came. Much more land was successfully taken under the leadership of Judah. In this context, Caleb's personal conquests are mentioned again (refer back to Joshua 15:13-19). This seems to point to Caleb's ongoing role as a leader, since he was from the tribe of Judah.

Yet, in spite of the leadership of the tribe of Judah and men like Caleb, the repeated refrain in this chapter emphasizes Israel's failure to trust God to occupy their entire inheritance:

“But they (Judah) could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had iron chariots” (1:19).

“But the sons of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem” (1:21).

“But Manasseh did not take possession of . . .” (1:27).

“Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites . . .” (1:29).

“Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of . . .” (1:30).

“Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of . . .” (1:31).

“Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of . . .” (1:33).

“Then the Amorites forced the sons of Dan into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the valley” (1:34).

This issue of incomplete occupation of the land (partial obedience) becomes the major issue in the book of Judges as the Canaanites who remained entrenched ended up seducing Israel away from pure devotion to Yahweh.

In a passing note about Israel's treatment of one of the captured Canaanite kings, we gain an insight into a major principle at work in God's dealings with these nations: Retributive justice. “But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. Adoni-bezek said, ‘Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to gather up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me.’ So they brought him to Jerusalem and he died there” (Judges 1:6,7). In the New Testament, the “Golden Rule” says: Do to others as you would have them do to you. In the Old Testament, the “Retribution Rule” says: It will be done to you as you have done to others. The harsh judgment the Canaanites received from Israel reflected God's sovereign, retributive justice over the way they had treated others during the 400 years of His patient waiting.

The Lord's rebuke against Israel: 2:1-5

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 altars.’ 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 will become as thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.’” When the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. So they named that place Bochim; and there they sacrificed to the Lord (2:1-5).

Israel’s sin was that of *partial obedience*. They compromised at critical points in their commitment to God. (Note the phrase: “*But you have not obeyed Me.*”) As a result, their lives were marked by thorns and snares in the form of temptations and testing from the very Canaanites they failed to drive out. (Note God’s response: “*I will not drive them out before you.*”) God was responding in keeping with Israel’s obedience *or* disobedience. This passage sets us up to understand the entire book of Judges: Partial obedience led to repeated departures from God, resulting in divine judgment and suffering for Israel.

Partial obedience (half-hearted following) is a self-defeating strategy. We usually engage in partial obedience to protect some part of our lives that we do not trust God with. Instead, we trust ourselves to manage that part of life (a relationship, a job, a hobby, a resource, a skill, a dream). We cannot give God the whole pie, so we give Him only certain parts, keeping the other parts under our own ‘safe’ control. Yet, the very parts we keep under our own control most often become the very things that bring us pain in the long run. These competing “gods” end up taking us down. Jesus ran into many people who wanted to follow him partially (see Luke 9:57-62). Some would follow only if they could maintain their safety and comfort. Others would follow only if they could hold tightly to earthly family commitments. Still others would follow only if they could make other relationships a priority. Jesus invited them all to go back home! He said: “No one who puts his hand to the plow, and keeps looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Joshua’s death & Israel’s apostasy: 2:6-10

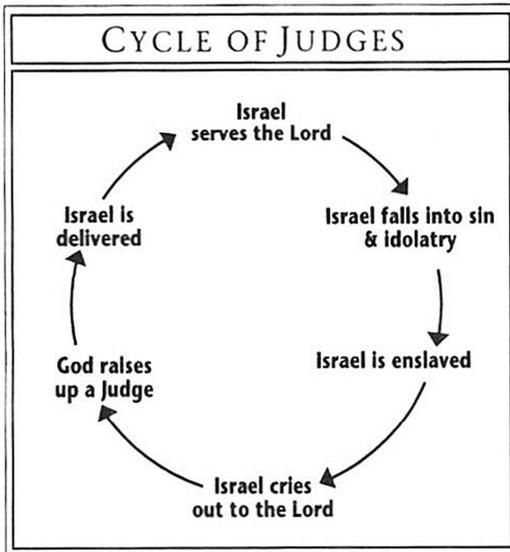
Joshua’s death is recorded again (see Joshua 24:29-31). The point here, however, is to highlight Israel’s drift away from devotion to Yahweh in the generations that followed Joshua.

The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done for Israel . . . and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel” (2:7,10).

Every generation **MUST** see and experience the goodness and greatness of God **FIRSTHAND**. No generation can live off of the faith-life of the previous generation(s). Both Joshua and Caleb had seen and experienced the miracles of God in bringing Israel out of Egypt. They experienced for themselves the provision and protection of God during the 40-year wilderness period. They were men of faith when it came to spying out the Promised Land, and believing that God would help them overcome the giants. They fought with faith-based courage once in the land. But now the torch was being passed to the next generation. God has no grandchildren. Each generation needs its own personal set of stories where God has showed up for them. **IF** a generation fails to **ENGAGE** with God in firsthand experiences, then the “faith” of that generation will quickly become a lifeless, intellectual idea. Such “faith” will quickly cave under the forces of the world.

The Sin-Cycles in the period of the Judges: 2:11-3:6

This summary passage is critical in understanding the entire book of Judges. It summarizes a Sin-Cycle that occurs over and over again throughout this 350-400 year period of Israel’s history.



Near the end of each cycle, God raised up a “judge” to rescue Israel from their oppressor. Judges were not what we, today think of as “judges.” They were typically strong military leaders (although Deborah would be a clear exception) who led the nation valiantly. They also mediated cases for the Israelites. The names of the judges and the years of their leadership are as follows:

Othniel 40yr > Ehud 80 > Shamgar 1 > Deborah 40 > Gideon 40 > Abimelech 3 > Tola 23 > Jair 22 > Jephthah 6 > Ibzan 8 > Elon 10 > Abdon 7 > Samson 20.

(Though not included in this list, **Samuel** was actually the last of the judges and served to transition the nation into the monarchy period where they had kings like the other nations.)

What does it mean when the text says that Israel abandoned God in order to “*serve the Baals*” (2:12,13)? In the land of Canaan at that time, it was believed that local deities such as Baal and Ashtoreth (Baal’s female consort) controlled a region and would either reward or punish people if they did not worship (serve) that local deity. The Israelites were unwilling to trust that Yahweh, their God, was all-powerful and supreme over these local deities. They feared incurring the wrath of Baal and Ashtoreth, more than they feared displeasing Yahweh and being disciplined by Him. Thus, they “served” (i.e., met the requirements of) the Baals, instead of living within the will of Yahweh.

They “abandoned the Lord” (2:12,13,17; 3:7). God knows what it feels like to be abandoned. Even Jesus, our sympathetic High Priest, knows what it is like to have His own Father turn His face away from Him, while hanging on a cross. Perhaps you have been deeply wounded by someone abandoning you. Take heart in the knowledge that God knows what you feel. Even more, He feels what you feel. Even more still, He can heal what you feel; because “He Himself has said: I will never leave you; nor will I ever forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5,6). God NEVER abandons His children.

Judge Othniel: 3:9-11

“When the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the Lord gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died” (3:9-11).

We know that Caleb was a mighty man of God, with great faith to trust God for giant-sized tasks. Now we learn that Caleb’s nephew, Othniel, the son of his younger brother, was also a mighty man, the first of the “judges” of Israel. Othniel had earlier demonstrated faith and military efficiency, so that Caleb gave his daughter to him in marriage (Joshua 15:16,17). Now, he emerges

as Israel's first great judge/leader. We see here the great blessing that comes to a family line when faith is exemplified by one generation, and then emulated by a succeeding generation. We also see here the unpredictability of God. Why not one of Caleb's own sons as the next great Israelite warrior? We cannot control or predict the mystery of God's ways with each individual. We can only live passionately for God, as Caleb did, and then wait and watch to see where in the family line that 'spark of faith' becomes a flame in someone else.

Here we also see a pattern that will repeat with each judge: *the Spirit of the Lord* will come upon the divinely appointed leader and, as a result, they will be given *the power to rescue* Israel from the oppressor. This "leadership anointing" was a temporary bestowal of power upon judges and, later, kings for the purpose of leading God's people. The judges were *not necessarily ideal leaders*, like Moses, Joshua or Samuel. In fact, some of the judges, like Samson, were extremely weak in character. Yet, they *all* were used to rescue Israel from oppression and usher in *a period of rest*. This Spirit-anointing for leadership could also be withdrawn from the individual (see Psalm 51:11; or 1Samuel 6:14).

"But, when the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help, the Lord raised up a deliverer" (3:9). No matter whether we cry out to God from a place of disobedience and hard consequences, or from some other difficult life circumstance, God listens to our cry for help and comes near to us. He will always respond to a sincere heart. "Come near to God and He will come near to you" (James 4:8). Let the words of Psalm 40 sink into your heart and encourage you in your trials: "For evils beyond number have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see; they are more numerous than the hairs of my head, and my heart has failed me" (Psalm 40:12). "I waited patiently for the Lord; He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me up out of the mud and mire. He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord" (Psalm 40:1-3).

Judge Ehud: 3:12-30

Just as God would, at times, strengthen a deliverer for Israel, so also He would, at other times, strengthen an oppressor against Israel as a discipline for their unfaithfulness to Him.

“So the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord” (3:12).

On the surface of the human situation, it appeared as if one nation was simply “gaining the upper hand.” Yet, viewing the human situation from God’s perspective, we see that it was God who was intentionally *giving one nation or another* the power to prevail.

Judge Ehud’s exploits are recounted in some detail. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a tribe with many left-handed men known for their military prowess (see Judges 20:16). Judge Ehud used his “left-handed-ness” to bring down Eglon the king of Moab and lead Israel to freedom.

A left-handed judge? In Ehud’s day, to be left-handed was NOT regarded as a strength, rather, a weakness. Yet, when empowered by God, this man’s weakness became His strength. What unique traits has God given to you that might, if surrendered to Him, might be used for His purposes and glory? Do you have a trait, an experience, even a propensity that you have always considered a weakness or a liability? Have you offered this to God as something that He might use for His purposes? “My strength is made perfect in your weakness” (2Corinthians 12:9). Who knows – maybe God’s greatest exploits in your life will come through your weaknesses.

Judge Shamgar: 3:31

After him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.

Shamgar is given just a passing notice. His judgeship may have overlapped with that of Ehud. Or, the writer of Judges may have been facing the obvious space limitations that came with ancient manuscript writing. Nevertheless, Shamgar’s most powerful exploit should not be overlooked: he single-handedly defeated 600 Philistines with a stick used to prod goats! How many people do you know who have defeated 600 men . . . alone . . . with a stick?

Judge Deborah: 4:1-5:31

While Shamgar is given just one verse, Judge Deborah is given significant attention in the book of Judges (2 full chapters). This is likely because the Holy Spirit wished to shine the light on the power of women to be used for God’s purposes in history. Deborah is also described as a “prophetess” (4:4,5). This was unique among the judges, except for Samuel. This means that she

received direct revelation from God. Not only Deborah, but also Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite, will shine in this part of Israel's history. Two women were used by God to save a nation! The story falls into two parts: 1) the description of the war and 2) the song of victory.

The war against Sisera: 4:1-24

How interesting that God would use a female judge as the champion for Israel's freedom *during one of the scariest and most oppressive periods in their history*. The oppressor, in this case, was extremely cruel and unusually well armed.

“Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. The sons of Israel cried to the Lord; for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years” (4:1-3).

Jabin “*oppressed Israel severely for twenty years.*” Part of this was because of his formidable force of “*nine hundred iron chariots.*” Yet, God will use 2 women to bring this formidable opponent to a swift and inglorious end!

Deborah called for Barak to lead a military charge against the enemy army, led by Sisera. Barak, however, hesitated *unless Deborah would go with him*.

Then Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” She said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman” (4:8,9).

The two armies met head-to-head at the River Kishon. Sisera had all 900 of his iron chariots with him! Yet . . .

“The Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot” (4:15).

We are not told here *how* Barak managed to thoroughly rout Sisera and his force of chariots. Yet, two references in the Song of Deborah (ch.5) provide us with the necessary clue:

“Lord, when You went out from Seir, when You marched from the field of Edom, the earth quaked, the heavens also dripped,

even the clouds dripped water” (5:4).

“The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent of Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon” (5:20,21).

There is one thing that would bring any army of chariots to its knees: a violent rainstorm resulting in the flooding of the River Kishon and a valley full of MUD! It seems likely that this is what happened, so that even Sisera the commander had to jump out of his chariot and flee for his life on foot (4:15). God (Lord of heaven *and* earth) humbled the proud army of Sisera by means of a thunderstorm and gave Israel the victory!

But that was not the end of the humiliation for the proud and cruel tyrant, Sisera. As the story unfolds, he fled on foot and turned into the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, thinking that he was finding refuge in the tent of a friend. Yet, Jael was *not* a sympathizer of Sisera, or of Jabin his king. Thus, while Sisera slept under a warm blanket, Jael took a hammer and a tent peg and dispensed with him via a single blow to the temple! As Deborah had prophesied to Barak . . . the honor for the defeat of Sisera fell upon a woman!

God can bring about victories in many different and even unexpected ways. This is why we must learn to keep our eyes on Him and not on the size of the challenges that lie before us. Pharaoh’s armies were drowned in the Red Sea. Jericho’s walls fell down. The sun stood still over Gibeon. Sisera’s chariots got bogged down in a rainstorm. Don’t limit God to your understanding of HOW things MIGHT work. God is able to do “above and beyond all that we can ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Ephesians 3:20)! Give Him your battles. Let Him figure out HOW to win them.

The Song of Deborah: 5:1-31

There are a number of significant songs tucked away in the Old Testament narrative, such as the Song of Moses (Exodus 15), or the Song of Hannah (1Samuel 2). These songs put into communal hymn form the record of the mighty deeds of God. Here we have the Song of Deborah, celebrating God’s mighty deliverance from severe oppression. Read the entire Song of Deborah through. It is quite powerful. Several lessons stand out in this Song.

1. The audience and the army.

Part of Deborah’s Song is a tribute to those tribes that came

valiantly to the battle, and a rebuke to those that did not come. Ephraim, Benjamin, Issachar, Zebulun and Naphtai were with Deborah in the fight, and she gives them high praise in her Song. Yet, several other tribes failed to show up for various reasons.

- Reuben deliberated; but failed to deliver.
- Gad (Gilead) chose safety in their land across the Jordan.
- Dan stayed busy with shipping and commercial interests.
- Asher chose peace by the seashore, rather than battle by the river.

2. The divine-human partnership.

“That the leaders led in Israel, that the people volunteered, bless the Lord! Hear, O kings; give ear, O rulers! I - to the Lord, I will sing, I will sing praise to the Lord, the God of Israel. Lord, when You went out from Seir, when You marched from the field of Edom, the earth quaked, the heavens also dripped, even the clouds dripped water” (5:2-4).

The leaders led . . . the people volunteered . . . the Lord went out. There is always a divine-human partnership in the way that God gets things done. When the apostle Paul described how the Church grows, he pictured it as a divine-human partnership:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1Corinthians 3:6-9).

God loves to partner with people to change the world. But He waits for us to make ourselves available for His purposes. Are you following in the footsteps of those brave tribes that led and/or volunteered for this great battle, and ended up partnering with God in one of the greatest victories of all time? Or, are you like those tribes that found reasons to stay at home, and missed the opportunity to experience firsthand the mighty work of God? Someone once said that there are 3 kinds of people in the world: Those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who say, “What happened?” How can YOU become more involved in God’s mighty activities today? Where can YOU serve? Where can YOU lead? Where can YOU help?

3. The power of one woman to seal the deal.

“Most blessed of women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; most blessed is she of women in the tent” (5:24).

What a moment for Jael! She did not wake up that morning expecting that God would lay the fearsome Sisera at her feet. When that happened, however, she was ready and she acted. She used what she had to deliver the knockout blow. She used her gift of hospitality: *“Turn aside, my master, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid.”* She used her resources: *“She opened a bottle of milk and gave him a drink; then she covered him.”* She used her strength: *“She took a tent peg and seized a hammer in her hand . . .”*

When a decisive moment presents itself, it is too late to prepare. We must be prepared in advance for such moments. Convictions must already be in place. The courage to trust God must already be the defining movement in our hearts. It appears that Jael was already prepared in her heart for such a moment as this. Had she not been ready, she would have been overcome by fear. She would have waffled in her decision. She would have backed down. She would have run away. She would have feared failure. She would have feared Sisera, rather than fearing God. Instead, Jael acted decisively because of what was already in her heart: courage and conviction. Thus, her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity turned out to be a turning point in biblical history. Sisera’s end, and Israel’s new beginning was sealed . . . at the feet of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. “Most blessed among women” is she!

4. The transforming influence of Deborah.

“In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were deserted, and travelers went by roundabout ways. The peasantry ceased, they ceased in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel. New gods were chosen; then war was in the gates” (5:6-8).

The rise of Deborah completely changed the atmosphere in Israel. Before her arrival on the scene, Israel was walking around like a nation of scared children in the midst of monsters. They could not even freely and confidently walk the roads. They had to take the roundabout ways everywhere, for fear of Sisera and his army. Then, Deborah arose, and *“new gods were chosen.”* Israel returned to their devotion to Yahweh under her leadership! Further, *“there was war in the gates.”* She would no longer accept the oppression of the enemy. There was not a single shield or spear among 40,000 warriors in Israel (v.8); yet, **Deborah had the spiritual strength to trust that God could still give Israel the victory over 900 IRON chariots and she rallied a nation to believe with her!** And all of this strength grew out of her LOVE FOR GOD. ***“May those who LOVE YOU rise like the sun in all***

its power” (5:31). Such was Deborah – a strong sunrise to break the power of darkness in Israel, and lead them into a bright new day.

The story of Deborah is one of the most powerful stories in the Bible about the role of women in the work of God. There are 13 judges in the Book of judges. Deborah must be regarded as one of the greatest of the judges, if not THE greatest of them all. Not only is Deborah highlighted . . . but her strength is set against the backdrop of the weakness of men in her day. Men were waffling and cowering in fear. Deborah rose up with divine power and turned the tide of Israel’s history.

Women, never underestimate the power that God has put within YOU to do amazing things for His glory. In fact, there will be many times when it will take your bold initiative to turn the tide in some situation. Find courage in the story of Deborah, and follow her method: 1) She spent time with God sitting under the palm tree. 2) She was attentive to God’s instructions for her life. 3) She boldly proclaimed the divine orders to those who could help her fulfill them. 4) She went into the battle herself. 5) She celebrated loudly, giving the glory to God.