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JUDGES

Lesson 1

Background and Survey

Its descriptions of human nature make Judges one of the saddest biblical books; some have called it the book of failure. Everything about the ending of the book of Joshua (which appears just before Judges in our canon) causes the reader to anticipate continued blessing upon God's people in the rest-land of their inheritance (read Joshua 24:19-28). But one does not proceed far into the account of Judges before he senses that all is not well. Although there are deliverances along the way, the tone of the book is predominantly one of oppression and defeat because "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (21:25).

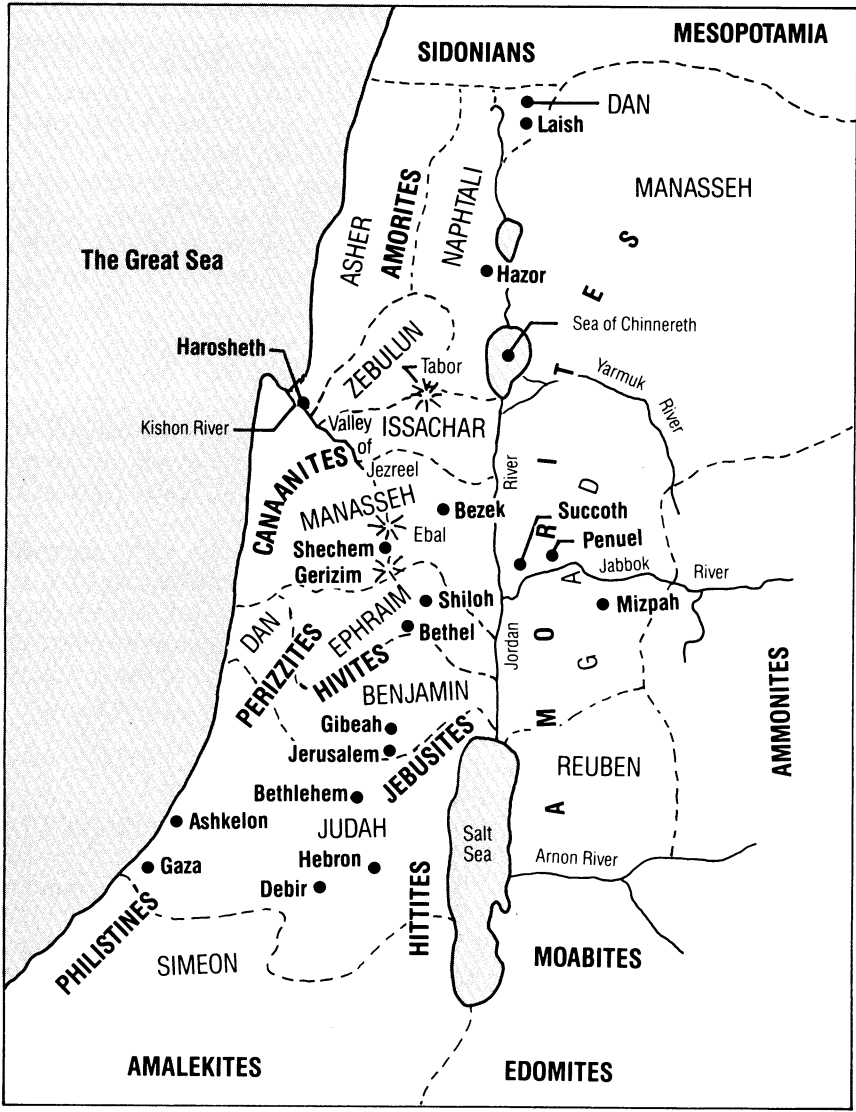
But there is more than that to the book. It includes the gospel of the grace of God, and it is our happy privilege to study this portion of God's Word to learn innumerable spiritual truths that God would teach us.

Before we make a survey study of Judges as a whole, let us first become acquainted with the background of the book.

I. BACKGROUND

A. Title

The title of the book is Judges, the Hebrew *Shophetim* (e.g., 2:16). These judges should not be confused with the ordinary judges of the theocracy who fulfilled judicial functions (Ex. 18:21-26). The main task of the *shophetim* was to deliver (3:9) God's people from the oppression of their enemies, usually by war, and then to rule the people during the era of peace.



GEOGRAPHY OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES
 (showing general locations of the enemy nations)

B. Date and Author

Judges was written and compiled by an unnamed prophet around 1000 B.C., not long after the death in 1051 B.C. of Samson, the last main character of the book. (Note: most of the dates used in this manual are those of John C. Whitcomb's chart "Old Testament Patriarchs and Judges.") The book was obviously written after Israel began to be ruled by a king, for the phrase "in those days there was no king in Israel" appears four times, implying that there was a king when the history was published (cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

Jewish and early Christian tradition have assigned this book's authorship to Samuel. If the author was not Samuel, he was a contemporary of Samuel.

C. Israel's Enemies

From Joshua and Judges we learn that although Israel conquered the whole land of Canaan in a general sense there still remained pockets of enemy pagan nations here and there. These proved to be tests for the tribes of Israel as to whether they would obey God's command to subdue them utterly. Those were enemies within the boundaries of their inheritances. In addition to this, enemy nations from without also plagued the Israelites. The book of Judges shows how God used His appointed judges to conquer them. Refer to the map on page 7 for the locations of these enemy nations.

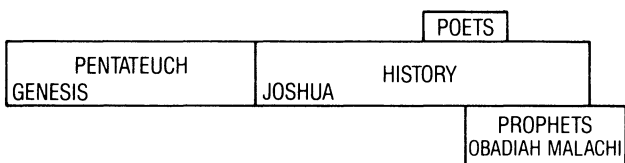
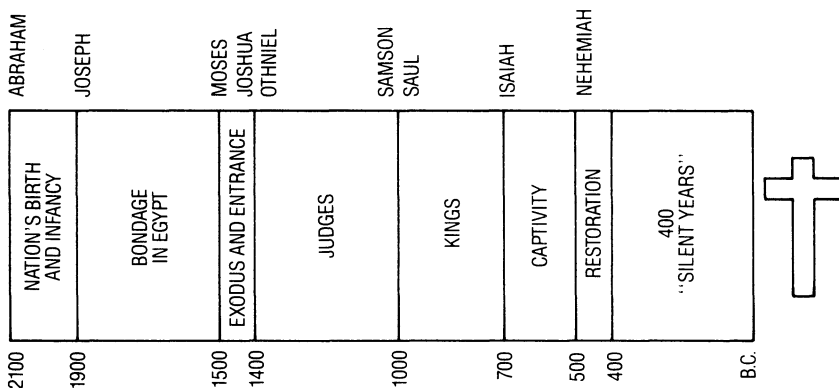
D. Place in the Bible

Judges, with its twenty-one chapters, takes up the narrative of Israel where the book of Joshua leaves it. The first verse makes this clear: "Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass . . ." (Judges 1:1).

In our Bible Judges is the seventh book, the second of the Historical Books. In the Hebrew Bible, Judges is seventh in the list, but it appears in the category called Former Prophets. It was classified as a prophetic book because, along with Joshua, Samuel, and Kings, it recorded the core of God's messages to His people in Canaan—blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience—which was the essence of the preaching of the prophets who appeared a few hundred years later (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah).

This era of judges was one of many important phases of Israel's history, as shown in the chart on the following page.

Study the chart closely, for it represents all of Israel's history from Genesis to Malachi.



Many comparisons may be made between the books of Joshua and Judges, some of which are listed here:

JOSHUA

Upward trend, spiritually
 One man is prominent
 Israel as a tutored child
 Victory
 Fidelity

JUDGES

Downward trend, spiritually
 No one man is prominent
 Israel as an adult
 Defeat
 Apostasy

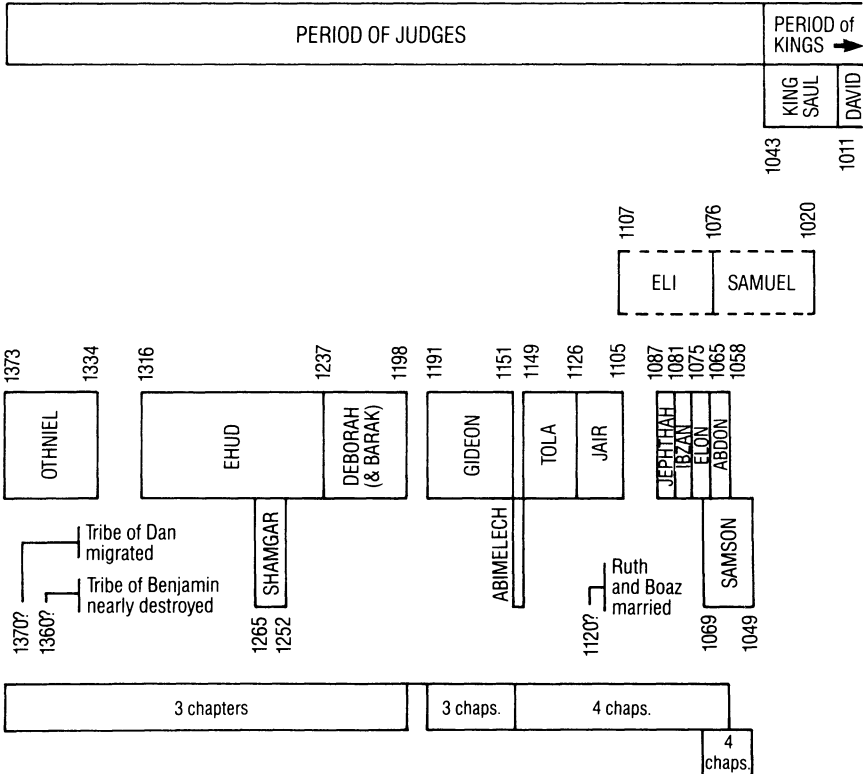
As the book of Joshua closes, Israel is shown taking a stand for God. Thus they entered into the promised blessings of the inheritance—victory, prosperity, and happiness—which is the life that God would ever have His people lead. They were still surrounded by enemies; indeed some enemies still lived within their boundaries. But if they would obey God's commands concerning these enemies, they would have the power of the Almighty with them.

In the book of Judges we see Israel turning away from God and doing the very things that God through Moses and Joshua had repeatedly besought them not to do.

E. Time Period of the Judges

The rule of the judges of this book (Othniel to Samson) extended for about three hundred twenty-five years. (Note: Eli, a priest-judge, and Samuel, a prophet-judge, do not appear in the Bible until 1 Samuel.) The following chart gives the order and dates of the reigns. Note how the three-chapter and four-chapter groups of the book of Judges cover these reigns.

DATES OF THE JUDGES



Begin now to become acquainted with the names of these judges, for they are the main characters of this Bible book.

II. SURVEY

Before we begin to analyze the individual parts of Judges, we

should get a skyscraper view of the book as a whole. This is necessary procedure for getting the most out of Bible study.

A. Names of the Judges

Before making your first survey reading of the book, become more familiar with the names of the twelve judges. (Abimelech, false ruler, and Barak, appointee of Deborah, were not judges.) To do this, study the accompanying chart describing the judges. Consult the Scripture references for each judge. If possible, memorize the list of judges. Pronounce the names aloud, for a more lasting impression (use pronunciations given in a Bible dictionary, if necessary). Note the tribe from which each judge came. Try to associate the items with the correct names under *identification*. Refer to the map on page 7 for the locations of the enemy nations that the judges fought.

B. Structure of the Book

First swiftly scan the book, reading at least the first and last sentences of the chapters and also the chapter headings in your Bible. The purpose of this exercise is merely to catch highlights and to sense something of the tone of its message.

Next choose a chapter title for each chapter and record these on the chart on page 15. (Note the special segment divisions at 2:6; 3:7; and 12:8. Mark these divisions in your Bible before you get your chapter titles.)

Record also the names of all the judges cited in the book in the chapter spaces on the survey chart. In what group of chapters do these appear? To which judges is much of the space in the text devoted? Compare how much space in the text is used to tell of the periods of rest (e.g., 3:11) with the amount of space used to describe events in the ensuing oppressions.

What does this reveal of the purpose of the book of Judges?

After you have finished with the above phase of independent Bible study, proceed with the study guides that follow.

Judges is divided into three main parts. Study the accompanying chart closely. See how your own chapter titles fit into the outlines.

JUDGES OF ISRAEL

NAME	TRIBE	IDENTIFICATION	ENEMY	YEARS OF OPPRESSION	YEARS OF PEACE	REFERENCES	NOTES
1. OTHNIEL	Judah	nephew of Caleb	Mesopotamians (king Chushan)	8	40	3:9-11	
2. EHUD	Benjamin	left-handed an assassin	Moabites (king Eglon)	18	80	3:12-30	
3. SHAMGAR	Naphtali	used ox goad	Philistines	?	?	3:31	
4. DEBORAH	Ephraim	only woman judge	Canaanites (king Jabin)	20	40	4:4—5:31	
5. GIDEON	Manasseh	of an obscure family sought a sign	Midianites	7	40	6:11—8:35	
6. TOLA	Issachar				23	10:1-2	
7. JAIR	Gilead	30 sons, 30 cities			22	10:3-5	
8. JEPHTHAH	Gilead	made rash vow	Ammonites	18	6	11:1—12:7	
9. IBZAN	(Bethlehem)	30 sons, 30 daughters			7	12:8-10	
10. ELON	Zebulun				10	12:11-12	
11. ABDON	Ephraim				8	12:13-15	
12. SAMSON	Dan	Nazirite from birth strongest man	Philistines	40	20	13:2—16:31	

1. Read 1:1–3:6, and observe how these chapters serve as an introduction to the main body of the book. Why is a main division made at 3:7?

2. The one main clue suggesting that chapter 17 begins a new section in Judges (called here Double Appendix) is that chapter 16 records the last of the judges of the book, Samson. When we come to the study of chapters 17-21, we will make a survey study of that section.

3. The long section 3:7–16:31 is one continuous story of deliverances and setbacks, showing the principles of 1:1–3:6 in operation. Also, as shown by the chart, the section Double Appendix emphasizes the utter corruption of the years of the judges by citing further examples of sins committed during that period.

4. Note the contrast between the beginning of the book (fighting the enemy) and the end (fighting a brother). Watch for other comparisons and contrasts.

5. Two excellent key verses are 2:19 and 17:6 (or 24:25). In the course of your study be on the lookout for other key verses.

6. What important truths have you learned thus far from your study?

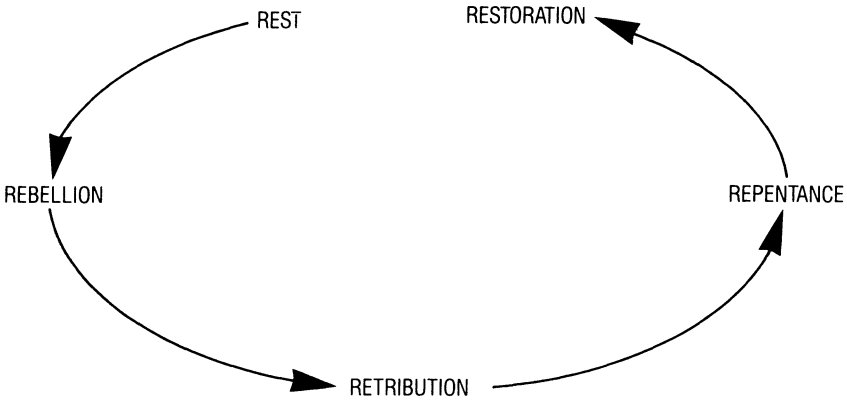
C. Theme

Two prominent lines of truth run through the entire book of Judges:

1. One is the desperate wickedness of the human heart, revealing its ingratitude, stubbornness, rebellion, and folly.

2. The other is God's long-suffering, patience, love, and mercy. No book in the Bible brings these two truths into sharper contrast—"the utter failure of Israel and the persistent grace of Jehovah."

1. *The Cycle of Israel's Religious Experience.* These two truths appear again and again in the book of Judges in a pattern that might be called a cycle, which is shown in the following diagram:



Read 2:16-19 to see the pattern of this cycle.

(a) REST. During Joshua's lifetime and for some years afterward, Israel served God and enjoyed the blessings of their rest-land. This is where the book of Judges begins.

(b) REBELLION. When a new generation arose, they divorced themselves from God and in rebellion against Him took on the ways of the Canaanites.

(c) RETRIBUTION. Just as He had said He would, God withdrew His protection and power from Israel and delivered them into the hands of their enemies.

(d) REPENTANCE. Then Israel repented of their sin and cried to God for help. (In 2:16 this is only implied; read 3:9 for a fuller statement. Read also 10:10 to see what was involved when they "cried unto the Lord.")

(e) RESTORATION. God raised up a judge to deliver His people from their oppressor and to lead them back to a life of fellowship with Him, back to the beginning of the cycle, REST.

At least seven times in the book of Judges this program is enacted. Seven times they forsook God, seven times He punished them, seven times they repented, and seven times He delivered them.

2. *The God of the Book of Judges.* The Old Testament is rich and full in its revelation of who God is. In your study of Judges you will learn much about God—*your* God. There is no one human hero in Judges. The real hero is the Lord. He is shown to be almighty in strength but tender in heart, persevering in grace but unyielding in wrath and judgment, diverse in His ways but simple and clear in His commands. He is the sovereign Director of the history of all peoples, the holy God condescending to sinful man and moving among them, supremely desiring to gain their hearts

JUDGES

Key verses:
 2:19, 17:6
FIGHTING THE ENEMY
 "Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites?"
 1:1

APOSTASIES OF GOD'S PEOPLE

300 YEARS of APOSTASIES, OPPRESSIONS, and DELIVERANCES		21
SAMSON		20
		19
		18
		17
		16
		15
		14
		13:1
		12:8
		11:1
		10
DEBORAH		9
GIDEON		8
		7
		6
		5
		4:1
		3:7
		2:6
1:1 NEITHER DID . . . DRIVE OUT		
INTRODUCTION	HISTORY of the JUDGES	DOUBLE APPENDIX
FAILURE CAUSES		
PRINCIPLES OPERATIVE	APOSTASIES, OPPRESSIONS and DELIVERANCES	IMMORALITY and LAWLESSNESS of BENJAMIN
	APOSTASIES, OPPRESSIONS, and DELIVERANCES	IDOLATRY of DAN FURTHER EXAMPLES of CORRUPTION CITED FIGHTING A BROTHER "Which of us shall go up first . . . against . . . Benjamin?" 20:18

and to be their Lord. As you study Judges open your heart to a deeper and more intimate knowledge of the Lord your God. (Note: the word *Lord* appears 178 times, and *God* appears 62 times in Judges.)

D. Spiritual Applications

The gospel (glad tidings) of Judges is that of restoration rather than regeneration. From the book of Joshua we learn how to appropriate the blessings of victorious Christian living (we in Christ and Christ in us); Judges spells out the woes of walking outside this fellowship with Christ and tells how to be restored.

Other valuable lessons are to be learned from Judges. Four of them are:

1. *God's people live far below their privileges.* The book of Joshua shows the high calling of Israel, the power and wealth and blessing that they enjoyed while being true to God. Judges shows the terrible unfaithfulness of Israel and their consequent weakness, failure, and poverty. Joshua shows how Israel might have lived. Judges shows how they actually did live.

The church is living below her privileges. The book of Acts shows how the church did live for a time under the direction of the Holy Spirit and how she might have continued to live if He had been allowed to rule, unhindered by sin and worldliness. But church history shows how she actually has lived.

2. *God gives the victory.* Victories are won “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6).

Throughout the history of the judges it will be observed that Israel had no might and no power in themselves. It was only when God raised up a man to lead—“and the Spirit of the Lord came upon him”—that Israel was delivered from the oppression of their enemies.

If the church is to win victories she must not depend upon her own wisdom, education, money, influence, or plans but upon the Holy Spirit.

3. *God uses weak things.* “Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Cor. 1:26).

This statement of Paul's is richly illustrated in the choice of the judges. God selected the weak things to confound the mighty: a woman, an ox goad, a jawbone of an ass. It was only by the Spirit of God that these weak instruments became mighty.

4. *God's people are to be lights.* God intended Israel to be a peculiar people, separate from all nations of the earth, uniquely His redeemed ones. Amid the abominations of idolatrous nations, this nation was to be a beacon—pure, holy, separate, pointing all

people to the one true God. God intends His church to occupy the same position in this age, and He would have every individual member of the church aspire to this position. Let each of us ask, "Am I occupying the place where it is God's will for me to be?"

III. REVIEW

We have considered many aspects of Judges in this lesson. Review the items studied thus far before you proceed to study the smaller individual parts of the book in the following lessons. Above all, be sure that you understand how the message of Judges applies basically to your own life so that you will be alert to catch its many applications along the way.