

JUDGES (2)

**The Pattern of Decline
&
The Good Judges**



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The Pattern of the Decline

We have discussed last week how Judges **2:10-23** describes the trend that we are going to see for the remaining of the Book of Judges.

v. 10-13	They served the idols
v. 14-15	God gave them over to the enemies; they cry out
v. 16	God raises up a judge to deliver them
v. 17	The people do not show a change of heart

Verses 18 -19 then gives the summary of this downward spiral. That God provided deliverance when the people groaned and raised up a judge. But as soon as the judge dies, they revert back to their evil ways, but with a condition that was worse than previously. We have discussed in the last session how evil always worsen, because this world is bound to decay because of the Fall (**Rom 8:21**). When unrestrained, this world is tending toward destruction.

Verses 20-23 shows how God in His wrath (**v. 20**) gave over of the Israelites to their desires, and no longer drives out the nations. Now, in light of last week's discussion we have compared what was happening to what God would do in our present age as revealed to us in **Romans 1:18-32**. Because of our insistence on evil, God in His wrath gives us over to our own desires (compare **Jud 2:20** with **Rom 1:18**). Our lives in sin becomes worse and worse, but because of this worsening also, God's light through the Gospel shines brighter and brighter. The purpose is to see if some (ie. The remnants) would admit of their sinfulness, cry out to Him and repent. The elect would eventually listen to the Shepherd's voice and repent; whilst the rest would drift yet further away. This was God's working through the good times as well as the bad, to discipline the elect; for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (**Rom 8:28-29**).

That was the grand summary. Let us now look at the details and learn further. In studying the Book of Judges, I have observed some patterns repeated throughout the book. For easier referencing, I have tried to summarize the entire message in a single table.

- General observations (refer to table below):
 - We could divide the eras into three sub-divisions. ① The era of the good judges ② The 'turning point' judge and ③ The era of compromised judges
 1. The Good Judges were Othniel, Ehud (& Shamgar), Deborah. Their weaknesses are not revealed.
 2. The 'turning point' judges was Gideon (& Abimelech). His story was told in a generally positive manner, or we can even describe it as being spectacular. However, his weaknesses though revealed obscurely, was evident to the discerning.
 3. The Compromised Judges were the remaining: Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson. The decline in morality was very evident. The motivation became increasingly self-centered, and the very last judge even went so far as to intermarry with a Philistine.
 - The periods of oppression is similarly sub-divided. In the periods of the good judges, Othniel ended 8 years of oppression, Ehud 18 years, Deborah 20. With Gideon, the length was reset to 7 years, Jephthah 18 and finally Samson 40. It was as if God was giving them lengthier time to ponder upon the state of their spirituality, and exhibiting a longer patience with which He waits on the Israelite to call upon Him for deliverance.
 - The impact of the judges' leading was also thus similarly divided. During the periods of the good judges (this time Gideon is included), there was a subsequent years of peace that followed, given in the multiples of 40. That would have indicated that the peace at least lasted through

one additional generation. However, with the periods of the bad judges, the only information we are given is the number of years they lead the Israelites, which indicate that the people deserted the faith as soon as the judge dies.

Oppressors	Period of Oppression	Judges		Led for (Years)	Subsequent Years of Peace	Morality	General Morality
Cushan-Rishathaim. King of Naharaim	8	Othniel	Judah (1 Chr 4:13)		40	Praiseworthy. Both Othniel and Aksah had faith to ask for land which were not yet won.	Generally positive. No weakness of the judge is mentioned.
Eglon King of Moab	18	Ehud (& Shamgar)	Benjamin (Jdg 3:15)		80	Ehud won through bravery and strategy. Shamgar won through bravery.	
Jabin King of Canaan	20	Deborah	Ephraim/ Naphtali		40	Female judge that God raised to inspire the men.	
Midianites & Amalakitess	7	Gideon (Abimelech)	Manasseh		40	Generally, the last "good" judge. Turning Point Judge. Israelites gave no trust or support. Mistake in making ephod. Hidden personal ambition.	Degrading morality. Motivation becomes more and more self-centered.
		Tola	Issaachar	23	Generally not mentioned		
		Jair	Gileadite Manasseh	22			
Philistines & Ammonites	18	Jephthah	Manasseh	6		Non-pious background. Ended up sacrificing his daughter to God. Motivation largely self-centered. Fought against the Ephraimites	
		Ibzan	Judah or Zebulun	7			
		Elon	Zebulun	10			
		Abdon	Ephraim	8			
Philistines	40	Samson	Dan	20		Womanizer. Motivation was self-centered. Intermarried a Philistine.	

Table 1: Summary of the Judges' Stories

This table pretty much summarizes my whole thought of the Book. If there are disturbing stories inside, it might help if we look how far we have gone in the progress of the decline. If a certain story seems rather horrid, ask yourself what the writer intended to tell us. Most probably it was because he wanted to honestly and truthfully tell us the progress of the decline; as well as remind us of the reality of the people that God used as His ministers. It will be useful as we reflect on some of the present day ministers of God. Some would be better than others, but all would be imperfect. Their imperfections must bring us to the perfection of God; rather than turn us into skeptics. That God uses imperfect people is grace, not compromise. Otherwise, we too are worth nothing but to be thrown into the fiery lake. Instead of reading the Book in a judgmental attitude, let us reflect on our own states, and the state of the Church at present. I think we will find that we, and the Church of the present days, are equally horrid and equally sinful. And if we see it this way, we will be able to see that God is truly merciful with us; and will be totally awed that He has chosen us to be His co-workers in the Gospel.

So without further ado, let us for this week, look at the good judges.

PART I: The Good Judges

- Othniel

Othniel is the first appointed judge of Israel, but he is not a new character who made his first appearance in the Book of Judges. The story of Othniel in Judges was a parallel of its initial mention in **Jos 15:13-19**, but retold with a different intent. His story in Judges, which is of primary concern to us at this point, gave the necessary background for his appointment as Israel's first judge.

Othniel appeared in a rather strange fashion in **Judges 1:12-15**, in which the narrative seemed like an abrupt interruption to the story of the tribe of Judah. However, his inclusion at this point I think is crucial to let the readers get a background information to his personality. Caleb implemented a very wise strategy for finding himself a son-in-law who feared God and anointed by Him. Attacking and capturing Kiriath Sepher would prove that the man is one who is eager to fulfill the promise of God, and is anointed by God to achieve the task at hand. The later story of Othniel and Aschach further proved that the husband-wife were eager to fulfill God's calling, as taking on more portions during periods of conquest would probably have meant more responsibility, not more comfort.

- Ehud (& Shamgar)

Ehud was described as being brave and very shrewd. The enemy he faced was a coalition that Eglon initiated with the Ammonites and the Amalekites; and therefore a very powerful enemy (**3:13**). And so Ehud had to resort to a very dramatic way of assassination (which would have made a very good movie plot). And it was only after he had already won his victory that he invited the Israelites to go into the war with him. As a leader, therefore, Ehud was exemplary. He undertook the greatest risk by himself, and only asked his fellow countrymen for war when victory was already assured.

Shamgar's story was brief and put alongside Ehud's (see **Jud 4:1** which put Deborah as a continuation of Ehud, not of Shamgar). Not much is said about him, but his courage was emphasized as one going to war with the most unlikely weapon. Such courage would be matched much later by David's, and I suspect it was because both of them knew that it was not by sword or spear that the Lord saves, and that the battle belongs to the Lord (see **1 Sam 17:47**).

- Deborah

Aside from being a judge, Deborah was also a prophetess (**Jud 4:4**). Her story is still portrayed very positively, and her weaknesses were not revealed. However, the story seemed intent to show the beginning of weakness in the societal structure of Israel. Men of Israel held back and were unwilling to go to war until Deborah arose (**Jud 5:7**). It seemed as if the writer was intent to show how two women, Deborah and then Jael, were central to the victory. In any patriarchal culture, women are rarely named, but here we have Deborah wife of Lapidoth (**4:4**) and Jael wife of Heber the Kenite (**5:24**) being specifically credited for victory. Deborah herself understood the limit her role should have – despite the fact that she was already leading Israel, she asked that Barak lead Israel into victory (**4:6-7**). Hearing that Barak lacked the faith, she consented to go to battle, but warned that the credit of slaying Sisera would now go to a woman (**4:9**), whose societal role was not in the battlefieldⁱ.

But Deborah showed herself to be inspirational, that Barak insisted she took part (**4:8**), and she would indeed inspire the otherwise cowering princes of Israel (**5:7**) to volunteer themselves in battle (**5:2**). The very fact that a woman stood up for battle caused much searching of the heart like that in the tribe of Reuben (**5:15-16**). It seemed that Sisera was very well equipped for battle, and that his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron was the technology that rendered Israel helpless (**4:3**). And it seemed that

Sisera had looked down on the Israelites and did not see how he could possibly lose (see how Deborah's song portrayed Sisera's mother as confidently waiting for the plunder from battle in **5:28-30**). But God used the forces of nature against Sisera, and both earthquakes and flood rendered the chariots useless and turned the tides of war (**5:4-5; 6:20-21**). In keeping with the prophecy (**4:9**), Barak was denied the glory of slaying Sisera, as he barely escaped from Barak's hand, only to be handed to a woman. Jael ended up being the one who struck the final blow in the battle, showing great faith by what she did. It was, after all, her husband's family who had struck an alliance with Jabin the King of Hazor (**4:17**), which meant that the Kenites either received a lot of benefit from Jabin, or was promised protection. Her killing Sisera meant that she cared little for the benefits they offered, and had faith that God was her Protector.

Here are a few trends which I want to bring our attention to:

- **The Judges:** Were written in a generally positive manner. None of their faults or weaknesses were exposed. All showed great courage and conviction.
- **The People:** The people were also written in a generally positive manner. They rallied to the judges when the call to war is sounded, and were mostly united in defeating the enemy. There started to be a negative tendency in the times of Deborah, in which all of the men cowered in fear. But when Deborah initiated battle, they were immediately inspired, and there was much searching of the heart which led to acts of faith.
- **Legacies:** The Judges left lasting impact. After their rule, we read about subsequent years of peace, which generally extended for another generation or two.

Next up, we are going to look at Gideon, the 'turning point' judge.

ⁱ So, rather than denying the difference of roles for men and women, the story of Deborah actually confirms it. Deborah admitted that it was indeed an unusual thing for women to be credited in battles. And her role in this war was only due to the failures of the men to step up; and that was to their shame. We are not discussing feminism here, but my view in a nutshell is that men and women are created equal; but equality is not the same as uniformity. And God had assigned each with their roles; to which each must adhere.