

# MANual Lessons from Judges

No one likes to go before a judge. We also don't want anyone to judge us, especially those who do not sit behind a courtroom bench. But the book of Judges shows us that judges are heroes too when they help us return to godly behavior and right living.

This week's lesson from The MANual, an NIV (New International Version) translation of the Bible, describes the work of 12 judges – men and women, who heroically delivered the people of Israel from their oppressors, despite repeated cycles of disobedience.

## Here Come The Judge(s)

With apologies to comedian Flip Wilson, I paraphrase a line from one of his famous bits to open this lesson. The 21 chapters in the book of Judges cover a time span of 325 years and six successive periods of oppression and deliverance. The setting is the land of Canaan which is modern-day Israel. God helped the Israelites conquer the Promised Land inhabited by a host of wicked nations. After the twelve tribes received their portions of land, each tribe rapidly returns to their sinful ways. All are in danger of losing their inherited lands because they once again stray away from God.

Chapters 1 & 2 of Judges describe that tribe after tribe has failed to drive out the evil inhabitants of the land. After Joshua's death, the Israelites began intermarrying and worshipping idols of the wicked nations. Judges 17:6 sums up

their behavior well: “in those days, Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.”

Out of desperation, the people beg for their rescue so, in His mercy, God raises up a series of judges that included Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah (with Barak), Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. One judge after another came forward as the complacency and disobedience of the Israelites continue.



**If I'm good, nothing bad will ever happen to me.**

A lot of people believe this myth and the similar one about “When bad things do happen, I'm not doing what's right.” Do good and be blessed. Do bad and get squashed. But is it really that simple? The reality is neither is right.

- What shaped your viewpoint about right and wrong?
- How does today's culture influence these views?

The main message of the gospel is that we don't get what we deserve (punishment and death) for as often as we sin. The Good News is that we also get what we don't deserve (forgiveness and eternal life) due to Jesus's death on the cross.

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Chapter 3 of Judges begins the period of the first judge: Othniel, who had a rich spiritual history. His uncle was Caleb, the man with unwavering faith in God (see Numbers 13:30; 14:24). Othniel's leadership during forty years brought the people back to God and freed them from oppression. But the Israelites fell back quickly.

After Othniel's death, the second period begins with a judge named Ehud from the tribe of Benjamin tricked, then killed the king of the Moabites. Judges 3:15 describes Ehud as "left-handed", which is symbolic for being outside of the culturally accepted norm of leadership in ancient Israel. It was also a significant tactical advance in war since the majority of people were right-handed.

Eighty years later, the cycle repeats after Shamgar kills 600 Philistines with just an ox goad, which is a long stick with a small iron point used to shepherd oxen. The pattern of disobedience returns again.



## **God Sends His Spirit**

The phrase "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him," was written about Othniel (Judges 3:10), and other judges such as Gideon,

Jephthah, and Samson, along with many others in the Bible. God doesn't just call us to live holy, powerful lives. He calls us to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. From the moment we put our trust in Christ, the Spirit becomes our "in-house" counselor to guide us into truth and empower us to serve others. But we have to listen for the Spirit's divine prompting.

- When do you most feel the power of the Holy Spirit working in you?
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Chapter 4 of Judges begins the third period with the story of Deborah, the fourth and only female judge of Israel. She was a wise leader who knew how to work with other people. She had special abilities as a mediator, adviser, delegator, and counselor. Deborah didn't deny, nor was hindered by her cultural position as a woman and a wife. She was not power-hungry but only wanted to serve God. She gave Him all the credit, and was responsible and commanded respect, even from the military general, Barak, who she instructed to send 10,000 warriors to fight Sisera's army at Mount Tabor. Deborah had prophetic power and wrote songs. Chapter 5 is her song that gives God all the credit for the victory.

The fourth period includes the times of judging by Gideon, Tola, and Jair. In chapter 6, the Israelites were again doing evil in the sight of God, who handed them over to the Midianites. Gideon, a farmer, received instructions from an angel of the Lord to confront the people directly. He reluctantly accepted his responsibility despite feeling his clan was the weakest in Manasseh and he was the least in his

family. God then gave Gideon several divine signs of assurance that would he defeat the Midianites. Gideon had many weak moments and failures but was still God's servant and obeyed.



## **Pulling The Trigger on Decisions**

We should probably cut Gideon some slack in his story. It's not every day that God shows up to tell someone to lead a battle. Obviously, Gideon wanted to be absolutely sure of what he was doing since this was a major life-change. God may not always do the same for us through stunning revelations as He did for Gideon. Most likely, He will lead us toward the right decision with peace if we listen for guidance and trust His plan.

- How much do you pray when confronted with a big life decision?
- Do you lean on the wisdom of others in addition to praying to God? If so, who?

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After Gideon's death, his son, Abimelech rules as self-proclaimed king over Shechem, his mother's hometown. He kills all but one of his 70 half-brothers and allowed his ego and power to corrupt his decisions. Later, Abimelech instructs a young armor-bearer to kill him with a sword rather than dying after a woman dropped a millstone on his head. The cycle

continues after Abimelech's death. There are only 5 verses about Tola (who is a judge for 23 years) and Jair (judge for 22 years).

The fifth period includes Jephthah, Iban, Elon, and Abdon. In each case, the Israelites disobey, then suffer again for many years before calling out for rescue. Once again.



## **My Spiritual Life will take care of itself.**

We don't become spiritually mature by accident. Just like the Israelites, we forget and stray from the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, fellowship, and the study of God's Word. So we must remember to continually train ourselves to remain godly.

- How you do to train to remain physically fit?
- What is your favorite spiritual practice to remain spiritual fit?

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Chapters 14-16 in Judges cover the sixth period of Samson: he of the great strength, who judged Israel for 20 years. God's plan was to use Samson to rescue the people from the Philistines. However, the sensuality of the woman he loved controlled Samson. He let the prostitute, Delilah cut-off the

hair that took away his strength. In the end, Samson recognized his dependence on God and prayed one last time for God's power to turn his failures into victory.



## God Buddy Focus

Men like Gideon and Samson are known for their heroism in battle even though their personal lives were far from heroic. Samson's story, in particular, shows us that it is never too late to start over and rely on God.

Metaphorically, we go into battle heroically each day. Our weapons include the moral standards, biblical truths, and personal convictions that we receive through the Holy Spirit. Remember that no matter how badly we may have failed in the past, God will restore us and deliver us. We simply need to place our trust in Him and make Jesus the authority of our lives.

This week:

1. When have you been judged for some wrong-doings? How did you recover?
2. What keeps you from allowing the Holy Spirit to guide your big decisions?
3. Of the stories in the book of Judges, which one

resonates most with you?