

O N E

J U D G E S 1-2

It Was the Worst of Times

**FAMILY FEUD LEAVES 69 BROTHERS DEAD!
POWERFUL GOVERNMENT LEADER CAUGHT
IN "LOVE NEST."**

**GANG RAPE LEADS TO VICTIM'S DEATH AND
DISMEMBERMENT.**

**GIRLS AT PARTY KIDNAPPED AND FORCED
TO MARRY STRANGERS.**

**WOMAN JUDGE SAYS TRAVELERS NO LONGER
SAFE ON HIGHWAYS.**

Sensational headlines like these are usually found on the front page of supermarket tabloids, but the above headlines actually describe some of the events narrated in the Book of Judges.¹ What a contrast they are to the closing chapters of the Book of Joshua, where you see a nation resting from war and enjoying the riches God had given them in the Promised Land. But the Book of Judges pictures Israel suffering from invasion, slavery, poverty, and civil war. What happened?

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The nation of Israel quickly decayed after a new generation took over, a generation that knew neither Joshua nor Joshua's God. "And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord, that He did for Israel. .. and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel" (Jud. 2:7, 10; and see Josh. 24:31). Instead of exhibiting spiritual fervor, Israel sank into *apathy*; instead of obeying the Lord, the people moved into *apostasy*; and instead of the nation enjoying law and order, the land was filled with *anarchy*. Indeed, for Israel it was the worst of times.

One of the key verses in the Book of Judges is 21:25: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (see 17:6; 18:1; 19:1).² At Mt. Sinai, the Lord had taken Israel to be His "kingdom of priests," declaring that He alone would reign over them (Ex. 19:1-8). Moses reaffirmed the kingship of Jehovah when he explained the covenant to the new generation before they entered Canaan (Deut. 29ff). After the conquest of Jericho and Ai, Joshua declared to Israel her kingdom responsibilities (Josh. 8:30-35), and he reminded the people of them again before his death (Josh. 24). Even Gideon, perhaps the greatest of the judges, refused to set up a royal dynasty. "I will not rule over you," he said, "neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you" (Jud. 8:23).

Deuteronomy 6 outlined the nation's basic responsibilities: love and obey Jehovah as the only true God (vv. 1-5); teach your children God's laws (vv. 6-9); be thankful for God's blessings (vv. 10-15); and separate yourself from the worship of the pagan gods in the land of Canaan (vv. 16-25). Unfortunately, the new generation failed in each of those responsibilities. The people didn't want to "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33); they would rather

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experiment with the idolatry of the godless nations around them. As a result, Israel plunged into moral, spiritual, and political disaster.

One of two things was true: either the older generation had failed to instruct their children and grandchildren in the ways of the Lord, or, if they had faithfully taught them, then the new generation had refused to submit to God's Law and follow God's ways. "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34, NKJV). The Book of Judges is the record of that reproach, and the first two chapters describe four stages in Israel's decline and fall.

1. Fighting the enemy (Jud. 1:1-21)

The Book of Judges begins with a series of victories and defeats that took place after the death of Joshua. The boundary lines for the twelve tribes had been determined years before (Josh. 13-22), but the people had not yet fully claimed their inheritance by defeating and dislodging the entrenched inhabitants of the land. When Joshua was an old man, the Lord said to him, "You are old, advanced in years, and there remains very much land yet to be possessed" (Josh. 13:1, NKJV). The people of Israel *owned* all the land, but they didn't *possess* all of it; and therefore they couldn't *enjoy* all of it.

The victories of Judah (vv. 1-20). Initially the people of Israel wisely sought God's guidance and asked the Lord which tribe was to engage the enemy first. Perhaps God told Judah to go first because Judah was the kingly tribe (Gen. 49:8-9). Judah believed God's promise, obeyed God's counsel, and even asked the people of the tribe of Simeon to go to battle with them. Since Leah had given birth to Judah and Simeon, these tribes were blood brothers (Gen. 35:23). Incidentally, Simeon actually had its inheritance within the tribe of Judah (Josh. 19:1).

When Joshua was Israel's leader, all the tribes worked

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together in obeying the will of God. In the Book of Judges, however, you don't find the nation working together as a unit. When God needed someone to deliver His people, He called that person out of one of the tribes and told him or her what to do. In obedience to the Lord, Moses had appointed Joshua as his successor; but later God didn't command Joshua to name a successor. These circumstances somewhat parallel the situation of the church in the world today. Unfortunately, God's people aren't working together to defeat the enemy; but here and there, God is raising up men and women of faith who are experiencing His blessing and power and are leading His people to victory.

With God's help, the two tribes conquered the Canaanites at *Bezek* (Jud. 1:4-7), captured, humiliated, and incapacitated one of their kings by cutting off his thumbs and big toes. (See Jud. 16:21; 1 Sam. 11:2; and 2 Kings 25:7 for further instances about being disabled.) With those handicaps, he wouldn't be able to run easily or use a weapon successfully. Thus the "lord of Bezek" was paid back for what he had done to seventy other kings, although he may have been exaggerating a bit when he made this claim.

Those seventy kings illustrate the sad plight of anybody who has given in to the enemy: they couldn't walk or run correctly; they couldn't use a sword effectively; they were in the place of humiliation instead of on the throne; and they were living on scraps and leftovers instead of feasting at the table. What a difference it makes when you live by faith and reign in life through Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:17).

Jerusalem (Jud. 1:8) was Israel's next trophy; but though the Israelites conquered the city, they didn't occupy it (v. 21). That wasn't done until the time of David (2 Sam. 5:7). Judah and Benjamin were neighboring tribes; and since the city was located on their border, both tribes were involved in attacking it (Josh. 15:63). Later, Jerusalem would become "the city of

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David" and the capital of Israel.

They next attacked the area south and west of Jerusalem, which included *Hebron* (Jud. 1:9-10, 20) This meant fighting in the hill country, the south (Negev), and the foothills. Joshua had promised Hebron to Caleb because of his faithfulness to the Lord at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13-14; Josh. 14:6-15; Deut. 1:34-36). Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai were descendants of the giant Anak whose people had frightened ten of the twelve Jewish spies who first explored the land (Num. 13:22, 28). Even though Caleb and Joshua, the other two spies, had the faith needed to overcome the enemy, the people wouldn't listen to them.

Faith must have run in Caleb's family, because the city of *Debir* (Jud. 1:11-16)³ was taken by Othniel, Caleb's nephew (3:9; Josh. 15:17). For a reward, he received Caleb's daughter Acsah as his wife. Othniel later was called to serve as Israel's first judge (Jud. 3:7-11). Since water was a precious commodity, and land was almost useless without it, Acsah urged her husband to ask her father to give them the land containing the springs that they needed. Apparently Othniel was better at capturing cities than he was at asking favors from his father-in-law, so Acsah had to do it herself. Her father then gave her the upper and lower springs. Perhaps this extra gift was related in some way to her dowry.

The Kenites (1:16) were an ancient people (Gen. 15:19) who are thought to have been nomadic metal workers. (The Hebrew word *qayin* means "a metalworker, a smith.") According to Judges 4:11, the Kenites were descended from Moses' brother-in-law Hobab,⁴ and thus were allies of Israel. The city of palms was Jericho, a deserted and condemned city (Josh. 6:26), so the Kenites moved to another part of the land under the protection of the tribe of Judah.

After Judah and Simeon destroyed *Hormah* (Jud. 1:17), the army of Judah turned its attention to the Philistine cities of

Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron (vv. 18-19). Because the Philistines had iron chariots, the Jews couldn't easily defeat them on level ground, but they did claim the hill country.

What is important about the military history is that "the Lord was with Judah" (v. 19), and that's what gave them victory. (See Num. 14:42-43; Josh. 1:5 and 6:27; and Jud. 6:16.) "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31)

The victory of Joseph (vv. 22-26). The tribe of Ephraim joined with the western section of the tribe of Manasseh and, with the Lord's help, they took the city of Bethel. This city was important to the Jews because of its connection with the patriarchs (Gen. 12:8; 13:3; 28:10-12; 35:1-7). Apparently it hadn't been taken during the Conquest under Joshua, or if it had been, the Jews must have lost control. The saving of the informer's family reminds us of the salvation of Rahab's family when Jericho was destroyed (Josh. 2, 6). How foolish of this rescued people not to stay with the Israelites, where they were safe and could learn about the true and living God.

2. Sparing the enemy (Jud. 1:21, 27-36)

Benjamin, Ephraim, Manasseh, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan all failed to overcome the enemy and had to allow these godless nations to continue living in their tribal territories. The enemy even chased the tribe of Dan out of the plains into the mountains! The Jebusites remained in Jerusalem (v. 21), and the Canaanites who remained were finally pressed "into forced labor" when the Jews became stronger (v. 28, NIV). Eventually Solomon conscripted these Canaanite peoples to build the temple (1 Kings 9:20-22; 2 Chron. 8:7-8), but this was no compensation for the problems the Canaanites caused the Jews. This series of tribal defeats was the first indication that Israel was no longer walking by faith and trusting God to give them victory.

The priests possessed a copy of the Book of Deuteronomy

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and were commanded to read it publicly to the nation every Sabbatical Year during the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 31:9-13). Had they been faithful to do their job, the spiritual leaders would have read Deuteronomy 7 and warned the Israelites not to spare their pagan neighbors. The priests also would have reminded the people of God's promises that He would help them defeat their enemies (Deut. 31:1-8). It was by receiving and obeying the Book of the Law that Joshua had grown in faith and courage (Josh. 1:1-9; Rom. 10:17), and that same Word would have enabled the new generation to overcome their enemies and claim their inheritance.

The first step the new generation took toward defeat and slavery was *neglecting the Word of God*, and generations ever since have made that same mistake. "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4, NKJV). I fear that too many believers today are trying to live on religious fast-food dispensed for easy consumption (no chewing necessary) by entertaining teachers who give people what they want, not what they need. Is it any wonder many churches aren't experiencing God's power at work in their ministries?

But wasn't it cruel and unjust for God to *command* Israel to exterminate the nations in Canaan? Not in the least! To begin with, He had been patient with these nations for centuries and had mercifully withheld His judgment (Gen. 15:16; 2 Peter 3:9). Their society, and especially their religion, was unspeakably wicked (Rom. 1:18ff) and should have been wiped out years before Israel appeared on the scene.

Something else is true: These nations had been warned by the judgments God had inflicted on others, especially on Egypt and the nations east of the Jordan (Josh. 2:8-13). Rahab

and her family had sufficient information to be able to repent and believe, and God saved them (Josh. 2; 6:22-25). Therefore, we have every right to conclude that God would have saved anybody who had turned to Him. These nations were sinning against a flood of light in rejecting God's truth and going their own way.

God didn't want the filth of the Canaanite society and religion to contaminate His people Israel. Israel was God's special people, chosen to fulfill divine purposes in this world. Israel would give the world the knowledge of the true God, the Holy Scriptures, and the Savior. In order to accomplish God's purposes, the nation had to be separated from all other nations; for if Israel was polluted, how could the Holy Son of God come into the world? "God is perpetually at war with sin," wrote G. Campbell Morgan. "That is the whole explanation of the extermination of the Canaanites."⁵

The main deity in Canaan was Baal, god of rainfall⁶ and fertility, and Ashtoreth was his spouse. If you wanted to have fruitful orchards and vineyards, flourishing crops, and increasing flocks and herds, you worshiped Baal by visiting a temple prostitute. This combination of idolatry, immorality, and agricultural success was difficult for men to resist, which explains why God told Israel to wipe out the Canaanite religion completely (Num. 33:51-56; Deut. 7:1-5).

3. Imitating the enemy (Jud. 2:1-13)

The danger. In this day of "pluralism," when society contains people of opposing beliefs and lifestyles, it's easy to get confused and start thinking that *tolerance* is the same as *approval*. It isn't. In a democracy, the law gives people the freedom to worship as they please; and I must exercise patience and tolerance with those who believe and practice things that I feel God has condemned in His Word. The church today doesn't wield the sword (Rom. 13) and therefore it has no

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authority to eliminate people who disagree with the Christian faith. But we do have the obligation before God to maintain a separate walk so we won't become defiled by those who disagree with us (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). We must seek by prayer, witness, and loving persuasion to win those to Christ who as yet haven't trusted Him.

The Jews eventually became so accustomed to the sinful ways of their pagan neighbors that those ways didn't seem sinful any more. The Jews then became interested in how their neighbors worshiped, until finally Israel started to live like their enemies and imitate their ways. For believers today, the first step away from the Lord is "friendship with the world" (James 4:4, NKJV), which then leads to our being spotted by the world (1:27). The next step is to "love the world" (1 John 2:15) and gradually become "conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). This can lead to being "condemned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:32), the kind of judgment that came to Lot (Gen. 19), Samson (Jud. 16), and Saul (1 Sam. 15, 31).

The disobedience (vv. 2:1-5). In the Old Testament, the "angel of the Lord" is generally interpreted to be the Lord Himself, who occasionally came to earth (a theophany) to deliver an important message. It was probably the Lord Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Godhead, in a temporary preincarnation appearance. (See Gen. 16:9; 22:11; 48:16; Ex. 3:2; Jud. 6:11 and 13:3; 2 Kings 19:35.) The fact that God Himself came to give the message shows how serious things had become in Israel.

The tabernacle was originally located at Gilgal (Josh. 4:19-20), and it was there that the men of Israel were circumcised and "rolled away" the reproach of Egypt (Josh. 5:2-9). It was also there that the Lord appeared to Joshua and assured him of victory as he began his campaign to conquer Canaan (Josh. 5:13-15). To Joshua, the angel of the Lord brought a message of encouragement; but to the new generation described in the

Book of Judges, He brought a message of punishment.

The Lord had kept His covenant with Israel; not one word of His promises had failed (Josh. 23:5, 10, 15; 1 Kings 8:56). He had asked them to keep their covenant with Him by obeying His law and destroying the Canaanite religious system—their altars, temples, and idols. (In Ex. 23:20-25, note the association between the angel of the Lord and the command to destroy the false religion; and see also Ex. 34:10-17 and Deut. 7:1-11.) But Israel disobeyed the Lord and not only spared the Canaanites and their godless religious system but also began to follow the enemy's lifestyle themselves.

In His covenant, God promised to bless Israel if the people obeyed Him and to discipline them if they disobeyed Him (see Deut. 27-28). *God is always faithful to His Word, whether in blessing us or chastening us; for in both, He displays His integrity and His love (Heb. 12:1-11).* God would prefer to bestow the positive blessings of life that bring us enjoyment, but He doesn't hesitate to remove those blessings if our suffering will motivate us to return to Him in repentance.

By their disobedience, the nation of Israel made it clear that they wanted the Canaanites to remain in the land. God let them have their way (Ps. 106:15), but He warned them of the tragic consequences. The nations in the land of Canaan would become *thorns* that would afflict Israel and *traps* that would ensnare them. Israel would look to the Canaanites for pleasures but would only experience pain; they would rejoice in their freedom only to see that freedom turn into their bondage.⁷

No wonder the people wept when they heard the message! (The Hebrew word *bochim* means "weepers.") However, their sorrow was because of the *consequences* of their sins and not because the wickedness of their sins had *convicted* them. It was a shallow and temporary sorrow that never led them to true repentance (2 Cor. 7:8-11).

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4. Obeying the enemy (Jud. 2:6-23)

The sin in our lives that we fail to conquer will eventually conquer us. The people of Israel found themselves enslaved to one pagan nation after another as the Lord kept His word and chastened His people. Consider the sins of that new generation.

They forgot what the Lord had done (vv. 6-10). At that point in Israel's history, Joshua stood next to Moses as a great hero, and yet the new generation didn't recognize who he was or what he had done. In his popular novel *1984*, George Orwell wrote, "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." Once they got in control of the present, both Hitler and Stalin rewrote past history so they could control future events; and for a time it worked. How important it is for each new generation to recognize and appreciate the great men and women who helped to build and protect their nation! It's disturbing when "revisionist" historians debunk the heroes and heroines of the past and almost make them criminals.

They forsook what the Lord had said (vv. 11-13). Had they remembered Joshua, they would have known his "farewell speeches" given to the leaders and the people of Israel (Josh. 23-24). Had they known those speeches, they would have known the Law of Moses; for in his final messages, Joshua emphasized the covenant God had made with Israel and the responsibility Israel had to keep it. When you forget the Word of God, you are in danger of forsaking the God of the Word, which explains why Israel turned to the vile and vicious worship of Baal.

They forfeited what the Lord had promised (vv. 14-15). When they went out to fight their enemies, Israel was defeated, because the Lord wasn't with His people. This is what Moses had said would happen (Deut. 28:25-26); but that isn't all: *Israel's enemies eventually became their masters!* God permit-

ted one nation after another to invade the Promised Land and enslave His people, making life so miserable for them that they cried out for help. Had the Jews obeyed the Lord, their armies would have been victorious; but left to themselves, they were defeated and humiliated.

They failed to learn from what the Lord did (vv. 16-23). Whenever Israel turned away from the Lord to worship idols, He chastened them severely; and when in their misery they turned back to Him, He liberated them. But just as soon as they were free and their situation was comfortable again, Israel went right back into the same old sins. "And the Children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord.... Therefore the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of ..." is the oft-repeated statement that records the sad cyclical nature of Israel's sins (3:7-8, see also v. 12; 4:1-4; 6:1; 10:6-7; 13:1). The people wasted their suffering. They didn't learn the lessons God wanted them to learn and profit from His chastening.

God delivered His people by raising up judges, who defeated the enemy and set Israel free. The Hebrew word translated "judge" means "to save, to rescue." The judges were deliverers who won great military victories with the help of the Lord. But the judges were also leaders who helped the people settle their disputes (4:4-5). The judges came from different tribes and functioned locally rather than nationally; and in some cases, their terms of office overlapped. The word "judge" is applied to only eight of the twelve people we commonly call "judges," but all of them functioned as counselors and deliverers. The eight men are: Othniel (3:9), Tola (10:1-2), Jair (10:3-5), Jephthah (11), Ibzan (12:8-10), Elon (12:11-12), Abdon (12:13-15), and Samson (15:20; 16:31).

The cycle of disobedience, discipline, despair, and deliverance is seen today whenever God's people turn away from His Word and go their own way. *If disobedience isn't followed*

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by divine discipline, then the person is not truly a child of God; for God chastens all of His children (Heb. 12:3-13). God has great compassion for His people, but He is angry at their sins.

The Book of Judges is the inspired record of Israel's failures and God's faithfulness. But if we study this book only as past history, we'll miss the message completely. *This book is about God's people today.* When the psalmist reviewed the period of the Judges (Ps. 106:40-46), he concluded with a prayer that we need to pray today: "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to Your holy name and glory in Your praise" (Ps. 106:47, NIV).