

A Faithful God for a Faithless People: A Study of Judges
Session 1: "A Disobedient People"
Father Jonathan Bailes
February 22, 2021

Summary of the lesson from Father Jonathan:

The apostle Paul told his young protégé, Timothy, that all of the Old Testament is "God-breathed" and is useful for "teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Or as we Anglicans like to say, the whole of Scripture is "God's word written" and leads us to salvation. But some books of the Bible don't seem to be as edifying as others, and Judges is one of those books.

*Judges is the "Wild West" of the Old Testament, filled with stories of violence, deceit, betrayal, abuse, and vigilante justice. **How can we possibly be edified by this book? How can we read it well?** These are the questions that we are taking up in this first session and, to answer them, the lesson draws attention to two important basic principles to help us as we read and study it: the context of Judges and the repeating pattern within Judges. By paying attention to these two principles, we will discover within Judges rich and profound lessons about the nature of human failure and the faithful character of God.*

Why Judges? It is a strange and neglected book. It is probably the most violent book in the Bible.

Robert Alter

"Judges represents, one might say, the Wild West era of the biblical story. Men are a law unto themselves – "Every man did what was right in his own eyes."

It does not seem very edifying. It is difficult to find moral or spiritual models in this book. It is the least referenced book in the early church.

Rhondda Williams (Welsh Minister)

"You many imagine, then, that this Book of Judges is not pleasant to read – much of it is quite ghastly. You must not go to it for any ideals of life, or learn anything about your own duty at the present time, except as you can see that it is your duty not to imitate the ways of most of the people whom you read in it."

Nevertheless, it is still Christian scripture. As Paul says in II Timothy, it is still useful for "teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." That is true of all of scripture.

How should we read this book? What are we supposed to get out of it?

Two themes we need to keep in mind:

1. The Context
2. The Pattern

THE CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

We don't know who wrote it, when it was written, or who the original audience was. But Father Jonathan is not thinking of the historical context, but more of its canonical context.

Where does Judges fit within the broader canon of scripture? What is its place in the Biblical story?

The very first line of the book alerts us to the importance of this context:

Judges 1:1

"After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the Lord ..."

Why start the book this way? It is similar to the book of Joshua which starts after the death of Moses. The author is telling us we need to know and to keep in mind where we are in the story.

Questions come to mind: “Who is Joshua? Why is his death significant? What happened beforehand?”

We need to remember that Israel is a nation that has been chosen for a specific purpose. They have been chosen to not just be blessed by God but to be a blessing to others – to all nations. That is what God told Abraham.

Genesis 12:2-3

“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

The purpose of Israel – to be a blessing that all the nations and families of the earth will be blessed through them.

How are they supposed to do this? By walking in the ways of the Lord as Moses puts it. This means living according to God’s law, obeying God, ordering their lives by following the will of God. In this they will reveal God’s character.

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses tells Israel that when they enter the land, the way they live will be something that other nations will see and will marvel at the character of Israel’s God.

In Judges, we see what happens when Israel fails to fulfill that purpose. Israel has just come into the promised land. They have been charged to avoid the gods of the other nations; to be loyal to God alone. The book of Joshua ends with the Israelites vowing to do just that.

Joshua 24:14-15

“Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness ... choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Israel responds with an enthusiastic promise to serve the Lord.

But after Joshua dies, Israel forgets their promise.

THE PATTERN OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The people fall into a tragic and cyclical pattern that undermines their purpose and which keeps them from fulfilling their calling to be a blessing.

What is this pattern? 4 steps:

Step #1: Israel disobeys God and engages in idolatry.

In chapter 1 and 2, the northern tribes fail to drive out the pagan people (Canaanites).

Judges 2:11

“And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.”

“The Baals” are various forms of Canaanite deities that Israel falls into idolatry with. The phrase “Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” is repeated six times in the book of Judges.

Step #2: God’s anger is kindled against them and he delivers them over to their enemies.

See Judges 2:14.

Step #3: Israel cries out to God and in response He raises up a judge.

This is where we get the name of the book. They are not judicial authorities – more like military leaders. But they bring God’s justice to the people and they are delivered.

Step #4: The land enjoys rest. Israel experiences peace which lasts for a generation or two.

Then the cycle repeats itself.

=====

So, why study Judges?

Because Judges teaches us something very important about ourselves and about God.

About Ourselves:

As Christians, we too have been called as a people to bless the world; to bear witness to our God by following the teachings in the example of Jesus.

We are tempted by idolatry. Idolatry is what we value and where we place our allegiance.

Author Stephen Fowl shows that in the Old Testament, idolatry is what arises when the people of God forget what they have been taught and give in to fear and greed.

It can be like looking in a mirror.

About God:

This book also tells us something important about the faithfulness of God.

Johann Gerhard (17th Century Lutheran Theologian)
“So, then, during all that time when the judges were ruling the people, the kindness of God and the idolatry and wickedness of the people of Israel battled with each other, as it were, to see which was superior.”

This is the contest at the heart of the book of Judges. Again and again, this story raises the question, “will God remain faithful to His promise to this people?”

How far will God go to keep his promises? This question is at the very heart of the Biblical story and in Judges it is raised with incredible urgency.

That is why we need to study this book because we need to hear its answer. We need to hear what it says to us about ourselves and about God.

Judges 2:11-19

Israel's Unfaithfulness

11 And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. 12 And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. 13 They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. 14 So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. 15 Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.

The Lord Raises Up Judges

16 Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. 17 Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. 18 Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. 19 But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.