

CHAPTER 9: Judges 3 thru 21 and Ruth

After years of battles the twelve tribes of Israel occupy the territories allotted to them – well, partially. Large portions of the land are still unconquered. But even in the lands the Israelites have taken, not all the Canaanite people groups have been removed. Instead the various Israelite tribes have settled in comfortably alongside them. They have even adopted their religious practices. All of this, of course, goes against everything God had warned the people first through Moses in the book of Deuteronomy and later through Joshua. There is a problem!

Over the course of time Israel becomes more and more like the Canaanites they are living with. Israel does evil in the eyes of the Lord. So God punishes Israel. He allows them to be conquered, oppressed and enslaved by their enemies. Recall the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy and Joshua. Eventually the people repent. Israel cries out to the Lord. When they do, God raises up a deliverer, a judge, from among the Israelite people. The judge unifies the people and leads them to defeat their enemy. Israel is delivered, which brings peace into the land. For a while Israel serves the Lord. Time passes and once again Israel does evil in the eyes of the Lord. Throughout the book of Judges this cycle is repeated over and over.

The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. They took the Canaanite daughters as wives and gave their daughters to the Canaanites; they worshiped their gods as well. The Israelites did evil in the Lord's sight. They forgot the Lord their God and worshiped the Baals and the Asherahs. (Judges 3:5-7) Grotesque idols with horrible immorality are tied to Canaanite worship. It is hard to fathom why Israel would do this after all that God has done for them.

God is angry and brings judgment on His people. He allows the king of Aram to enslave them for 8 years. The people cry out to God for deliverance and He raises up Othniel who is Caleb's nephew. **The Lord's spirit empowered [Othniel] and he led Israel.** (Judge 3:10) Under Othniel's leadership, the people live free and are at peace for 40 years. But when Othniel dies, the people return to their evil ways.

Othniel is the first in a long line of Israelite judges. God raises them up from throughout the entire land of Israel.

God strengthens Eglon, king of Moab, and the people are placed under Moabite control for 18 years. **When the Israelites cried out for help to the Lord, He raised up**

a deliverer for them. His name was Ehud son of Gera the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. (Judges 3:15)

Ehud leads a delegation to deliver the annual tribute payment to Eglon, king of Moab. When Ehud and Eglon are alone, Ehud plunges a foot-long dagger into the king's belly and kills him. Ehud manages to escape before anybody realizes what has happened. He rallies the Israelite troops in the hill country who strike down 10,000 Moabites. The nation of Israel has peace for 80 years.

After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath; he killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad and, like Ehud delivered Israel. (Judges 3:31) The Philistines at some point invade Israel, but Shamgar defeats them. After Shamgar dies the people of Israel once again do evil. This leads to 20 years of oppression by Jabin the king of Canaan. So, here we go again! Can you see the continuous cycle?

The sons of Israel cry out to God. Enter Deborah, the prophetess, who becomes Israel's only woman judge. Unlike the other judges, she's not a military leader, but she is well respected by God's people. **Now Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at the time. She would sit under the Date Palm Tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the Ephraimite hill country. The Israelites would come up to her to have their disputes settled.** (Judges 4:4) Deborah's role is more like that of a judge you would see today. She becomes God's instrument of deliverance from Jabin the king of Canaan.

Deborah summons Barak, Israel's military leader. She commands him to take 10,000 Israelite soldiers and attack a much larger, more highly skilled and better-equipped Canaanite army led by its general, Sisera. **Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go. But if you do not go with me, I will not go." She said, "I will indeed go with you. But you will not gain fame on the expedition you are undertaking, for the Lord will turn Sisera over to a woman." Deborah got up and went with Barak...** (Judges 4:8-9)

Barak's troops rout the Canaanites. God wins the battle by causing a great downpour of rain. This turns the battlefield into a sea of mud which renders the Canaanite's horse and chariots useless. Sisera escapes the battle. But Sisera ends up being killed. While he is asleep he has a tent peg driven through his head by a woman named Jael. Deborah's prophecy comes true: **"the Lord will turn Sisera over to a woman."**

The Israelites did evil in the Lord's sight, so the Lord turned them over to Midian for seven years. The Midianites overwhelmed Israel... (Judges 6:1-2) The Midianites attack Israel during the harvest time which devastates Israel's economy. As before, the people cry out to God for help. So God calls Gideon to deliver His people.

The Lord's Spirit took control of Gideon. He blew a trumpet, summoning the [various tribes of Israel] to follow him. (Judges 6:34) The Midianite army mobilizes for war against Israel. Gideon forms an army to fight against the advancing Midianites. He asks God to show him a sign as proof that God will indeed deliver Israel under his leadership. First, Gideon asks God to make the ground dry while the fleece he has laid out is wet. God does it. Then Gideon asks God to make the ground wet while the fleece remains dry. Again, God comes through. So, Gideon knows now that God is with him.

And sure enough God intervenes for Israel under Gideon's command. The huge army of Midianites is defeated by Israel's small band of just 300 men chosen by God. The Israelites are equipped with only trumpets and clay jars containing torches inside.

Here is what happens... **Gideon takes a hundred men to the edge of the [Midianite] camp [about 10 pm]... They blew their trumpets and broke the jars they were carrying. All three units blew their trumpets and broke their jars. They held their torches in their left hand and their trumpets in the right. Then they yelled, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" When the three hundred men [of Israel] blew their trumpets the Lord caused the Midianites to attack one another with their swords throughout the camp. The army fled... Israelites from Naphtali, Asher and Manasseh answered the call and chased the Midianites.** (Judges 7:19-23)

Later on Gideon rejects an appeal by Israel to be their king, but the land is at rest for 40 years.

There is one blemish on Gideon's legacy. Gideon takes the gold and jewelry from the defeated Midianite kings... **Gideon used all this to make an ephod** (the outer garment of a Levitical priest's clothing), **which he put in his hometown of Ophrah. All the Israelites prostituted themselves to it by worshiping it there. It became a snare to Gideon and his family.** (Judges 8:27) So even before Gideon dies we can see the downward cycle of sin beginning again.

After Gideon died, the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals... The Israelites did not remain true to the Lord their God who had delivered them from all the enemies who lived around them. (Judges 8:33-34)

We are introduced to a despicable, self-seeking, godless thug named Abimelech. He murders 70 of his half-brothers who are the sons of Gideon. One of Gideon's sons, Jotham, does survive. Abimelech tries to make himself the first king of Israel. But God intervenes and the very best part of Abimelech's story is the way he's killed. While attacking a city a woman throws a millstone down from a tower on his head and shatters his skull!

After Abimelech's death, Tola... from the tribe of Issachar, rose up to deliver Israel... He led Israel for 23 years, then died and was buried in Shamir. Jair the Gileadite rose up after him; he led Israel for 22 years. He had 30 sons who rode on 30 donkeys and possessed 30 cities... (Judges 10:1-4) So Israel has peace for 45 years under these two judges.

The Israelites again did evil in the Lord's sight. They worshiped the Baals and the Ashtoreths, as well as the gods of Syria, Sidon, Moab... They abandoned the Lord and did not worship Him. The Lord was furious with Israel and turned them over to the Philistines and Ammonites. They ruthlessly oppressed the Israelites... (Judges 10:6-8)

The people repent and cry out to God. He then raises up Jephthah the Gileadite, a valiant warrior who leads a tough band of renegade fighters. The elders approach him to help them fight against the oppressive Ammonites. Jephthah agrees to fight but only if after defeating the Ammonites, they make him their leader. So they agree. Jephthah sends a letter to the king of Ammon arguing Israel's right to the disputed land and claiming it as a divine gift. God's giving of this land to Israel harkens back to the covenant promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 13 and 15. Of course, the king of Ammon disregards Jephthah's message.

The Lord's Spirit empowered Jephthah... Jephthah approached the Ammonites to fight with them, and the Lord handed them over to him... He wiped them out! The Israelites humiliated the Ammonites. (Judges 11:29, 32-33)

But Jephthah's story does NOT have a happy ending. Jephthah makes a rather rash vow to God just prior to going out to fight against the Ammonites. **Jephthah made a vow to the Lord saying, "If You really do hand the Ammonites over to me, then whoever is the first to come through the doors of my house to meet me when I return safely – he will belong to the Lord and I will offer him up as a burnt sacrifice."** (Judges 11:30-31) As it turns out the first one that comes out to meet him is his only daughter!

There is some debate over whether Jephthah actually sacrifices his daughter. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Whatever the case, this story shows just how far Israel has fallen spiritually. Their own leaders no longer know the good character of God. In the Law God clearly states that He hates human sacrifices. But instead of following God's Law, Jephthah appears to adopt an awful Canaanite practice of the day, that of offering human sacrifices to the gods. And besides, Jephthah had NO reason to make such a vow. God had already promised him victory over the Ammonites. While overall Jephthah is a good leader, in the end he exhibits bottom line behavior and his story is very tragic.

Jephthah continues to lead Israel for 6 more years. He's followed by Ibzan who leads for 7 years. Elon is next and he leads for 10 years. Then Abdon comes along and leads for 8 years. Israel enjoys 3 decades of peace with their neighbors before the cycle starts again.

The Israelites again did evil in the Lord's sight, so the Lord handed them over to the Philistines for forty years. (Judges 13:1) This brings us to Samson whose life is covered in Judges 13-16. He begins full of promise. But Samson shows little regard for the God of Israel. Though Samson is blessed with God-given strength, he is morally and spiritually weak. He possesses little integrity. Several stories about Samson's life demonstrate his character flaws.

As a young man he falls in love with a Philistine woman who looks good to him. Against his godly parent's objections Samson insists on marrying her. Despite Samson's less than honorable motives, God uses this relationship to defeat the enemies of Israel, the Philistines.

On another occasion Samson is walking along the roadway and becomes very hungry. He spots some honey. He scoops it out a dead lion's carcass with his bare hands and eats it. This action demonstrates Samson's indifference toward spiritual things because part of his Nazarite vow, a vow he had made to God, includes not touching dead bodies.

In another incident, Samson gets so angry at his friends after losing a bet that he goes out and kills 30 Philistines. He strips the dead men of their garments and gives them to his friends as payment on his bet.

Sometime later this happens – Samson discovers that his bride-to-be has married another man. Samson becomes furious. In an act of revenge he catches 300 foxes, lights their tails on fire and then turns them loose in the Philistine wheat fields, vineyards and olive groves.

One time Samson actually gets captured by the Philistines. But he escapes. In so doing he slaughters 1000 of them single-handedly with the jawbone of a donkey. Such incredible strength and brutality!

And then you have this story... In an act of brute strength Samson removes the gate to the city of Gaza with its two posts and carries them 38 miles up into the hill country, to Hebron. With Samson it is just one bizarre story like this after another!

After many heroic actions against the Philistines, Samson is appointed as Israel's judge and he leads the nation for 20 years.

His downfall comes at the hands of a Philistine prostitute named Delilah. She attempts to discover the secret to Samson's great strength. Three times she asks and three times he tells her a lie. But Samson is so motivated by his passion for Delilah that he fails to recognize her ultimate goal, which is, to betray Samson to the Philistines. Eventually, he grows so tired of being nagged by Delilah that he gives away the true secret of his strength, which is, his long hair. One night while Samson is asleep, Delilah cuts off his hair. This drains him of his supernatural strength and it allows the Philistines to finally capture Samson. They blind him (put his eyes out) and then force him to grind grain for them like an ox. What a woeful tale!

But the story does not end there. Despite Samson's moral failure, God is able to use him one last time. After several months, Samson is brought to a Philistine temple to be ridiculed. By now his hair has grown back and his strength has returned. The Philistines make Samson stand between two pillars that support the large temple structure.

Samson called to the Lord, "O Master, Lord, remember me! Strengthen me just one more time, O God, so I can get swift revenge against the Philistines for my two eyes!" Samson took hold of the two middle pillars that supported the temple and he leaned against them, with his right hand on one and his left hand on the other. Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" He pushed hard and the temple collapsed on the rulers and on all the people in it. He killed many more people in his death than he had killed during his life. (Judges 16:28-30)

At key moments in the book of Judges, God's Spirit empowers each of these judges to perform heroic acts of bravery to deliver God's people. God is committed to saving His covenant people and He uses less than perfect people time after time to do that.

The last part of the book of Judges shows Israel hitting rock bottom morally. Two tragic stories are told that illustrate a statement made at the close of the book – **In those days Israel had no king. Each man did what he considered to be right.** (Judges 21:25) – This sounds a lot like the way things are today!

The first story is about an Israelite named Micah. He tries to obtain the blessings of God by setting up all the proper religious trappings – a shrine, an ephod (like Gideon had), idols and even a Levite priest. But Micah has no idea what he's doing. Some men from the tribe of Dan come and steal the objects from Micah's shrine. They take his Levite priest away with them. Like Micah, they set up a worship center that has no spiritual value and violates God's Law. Israel incorporates elements of pagan idol worship into their so-called worship.

The second story is even worse. A Levite and his concubine stop for the night at an Israelite village located in the territory of Benjamin. During the night the men of the village attempt to homosexually rape the Levite. Fear prompts the Levite to send his concubine outside. They rape and brutalize her all night long. The next morning the Levite finds his concubine's dead body outside his front door. He carries her body back home with him. When he arrives at his house he cuts her body up into 12 parts and sends one part to each tribe of Israel. This is done to get the nation's attention and it has the desired effect. The Israelites become outraged and vow to wipe out all the inhabitants of that village. The people of Benjamin come to the villager's aid and a civil war ensues – all the other tribes against the tribe of Benjamin. The tragic result is that the tribe of Benjamin is almost wiped out.

In both of these stories we can see Israel descending in a downward spiral toward self-destruction as they turn from the one true God. After reading Judges we just can't help but wonder: "Has the entire nation of Israel completely forsaken God?" It certainly looks that way.

But then -- a ray of hope! We are reminded that there is still a remnant of God's people who, during this terrible period of time, DO in fact remain faithful to God. They do things the right way. We find them in the book of Ruth.

The events in the book of Ruth actually take place "**During the time of the judges...**" (Ruth 1:1). So then, historically the book of Ruth fits here.

We are introduced to an Israelite family from Bethlehem – Naomi, Elimelech and their two adult sons. A famine hits Israel hard and the family struggles to survive. Their search for food takes them to the land of Moab, a neighboring country and enemy of Israel.

While they are living in Moab Elimelech, the husband, dies. The two sons meet and marry two Moabite women named Ruth and Orpah. But then the two sons also die. This leaves Naomi and her new daughters-in-law as destitute widows.

With her husband and sons dead and the famine now over, Naomi has no reason to stay in Moab any longer. Naomi tells her daughters-in-law good-bye and prepares to go back to Israel. Naomi compels the two women to remain in Moab while she returns home. Orpah agrees with this, but Ruth does not. Ruth wants to remain with Naomi. She is loyal to her.

But Ruth replied, "Stop urging me to abandon you! For wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live, I will live. Your people will become my people, and your God will become my God." (Ruth 1:16) And so with that Naomi and Ruth journey together to Israel.

Naomi changes her name to Mara, which means “bitter.” Naomi laments the terrible hand she has been dealt – no husband, no sons, and no grandchildren. Naomi feels her family has no future. She is very distraught.

Back home in Bethlehem Naomi and Ruth try to figure out where they’re going to find food. Fortunately the barley harvest has just begun. So Ruth heads out to the fields looking for food. Recall the practice of gleaning (Deuteronomy 24). Ruth ends up picking grain in the field of a wealthy and prominent man named Boaz. As it turns out, he is Naomi’s relative, somehow related to her deceased husband Elimelech.

When Boaz arrives on the scene he notices Ruth gleaning in his fields and asks about her. His servants inform him that she is a Moabite who came back with Naomi. Boaz welcomes Ruth and invites her to continue gathering grain in his fields. He promises to protect and to provide for her. Boaz informs Ruth that her kindness to Naomi after the death of her husband is well known. Boaz blesses Ruth. He says, **“May the Lord reward your efforts! May your acts of kindness be repaid fully by the Lord God of Israel, from whom you have sought protection!”** (Ruth 2:12) Boaz instructs his workers to leave stalks of grain for Ruth to gather.

Ruth comes home that day and tells Naomi that she met Boaz. Naomi is thrilled! **Then Naomi said to [Ruth], “This man is a close relative of ours; he is our guardian.”** (Ruth 2:20) Naomi encourages Ruth to continue gleaning in Boaz’s fields. The news about Boaz gives Naomi a renewed hope that there might still be a bright future for her family after all.

Naomi formulates a plan. She instructs Ruth to approach Boaz and, following an Israelite custom, request that he marry her as her guardian, as her kinsman redeemer. So that night Ruth goes to meet Boaz at the threshing floor. She lies down beside him while he sleeps. When he awakens he is startled to see Ruth next to him. At this point Ruth makes her intentions clear. She inquires as to the possibility that Boaz might be willing to redeem Naomi’s family by marrying her (Ruth).

Boaz again is impressed by the loyalty Ruth shows to Naomi. He replies... **“Now, my dear, don’t worry! I intend to do for you everything that you propose, for everyone in the village knows that you are a worthy woman. Now yes, it is true that I am a guardian, but there is another guardian who is a closer relative than I am. Remain here tonight. Then in the morning, if he agrees to marry you, fine, let him do so. But if he does not want to do so, I promise as surely as the Lord lives, to marry you.”** (Ruth 3:11-13) His reply is not a definite “yes” but more like “let’s wait and see.” Ruth returns home to Naomi and tells her what happened. All they can do now is wait.

The next day Boaz goes into the village and meets up with the other family member. In the presence of the town elders Boaz explains the situation to this relative and gives him the option. He can either assume the role of the family guardian or not. After learning that by doing so he will be required to marry Ruth the Moabite, he declines. But Boaz knows Ruth's true character. And so he goes through the process of legally acquiring Naomi's family property and marries Ruth.

So Boaz married Ruth and had sexual relations with her. The Lord enabled her to conceive and she gave birth to a son. (Ruth 4:13)

The book of Ruth concludes with all of the tragedies that took place at the beginning of the book being reversed. The deaths of Naomi's husband and sons are reversed when Ruth remarries and gives birth to son. Naomi's sorrow is now turned into joy.

One very interesting feature of this story in the book of Ruth is that God is hardly ever mentioned. Oh sure, the various characters allude to God several times. However, the author never once mentions God taking any direct action. And yet we can see evidence of God at work behind every scene. We see God orchestrating the circumstances and choices of the various individuals. Naomi's tragic losses at the beginning led her to believe that God was somehow punishing her. In reality this whole story is about God working to bring healing to Naomi and her family through an unlikely Gentile girl named Ruth. And God also uses Boaz, an Israelite man of integrity and full of generosity, to save Naomi and her family.

The book of Ruth effectively looks at the interaction between God's sovereignty and human free will. God somehow weaves together the faithful obedience of His people with His redeeming love. We see God work all things out to accomplish His will – even in the ordinary, mundane details of everyday life. And even during this terrible Period of the Judges.

The book of Ruth ends with a genealogy that was apparently written long after the events recorded in of the book. It begins like this: **These are the descendants of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron...** (Ruth 4:18). Who is Perez? Perez was the son of Judah. We remember Judah from Genesis as being one of Jacob's 12 sons. Judah was the one through whom the royal line was prophesied by Jacob on his deathbed. The genealogy ends with these words: **Salmon was the father of Boaz, Boaz was the father of Obed, Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David.** (Ruth 4:21-22) Here we are told that the royal line runs through Boaz. As for the last man mentioned, David – well, let's just say that he becomes a very significant character later in our story.