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Enemy Attacks of the Promised Land



I. Deterioration (Jdg 1:1-3:4)

With the book of Judges comes a desperate struggle. The Israelites had the Promised Land. They were in it. It had been distributed to them to the extent that they were faithful. They had conquered it. The judges period is a period of decline, not of success. The Israelites show themselves increasingly unfaithful. Enemy after enemy attacks them, trying to take away this part of the Promised Land or that part of the Promised Land. The people, as a result of their sin, are not really up to holding on to it.

A. Military Decline

The writer of the book of Judges, whoever it is, we do not know, has taken the trouble at the beginning of the book to say, at several points: “After Joshua died, such and such happened.” You can look for that as you read through it. Then, toward the end of the book, the writer says in several places, “There was no king in Israel in those days. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” The writer is emphasizing that after Joshua died there was trouble—things declined. Before the kingship, before the monarchy, the people really got into more and more trouble and desperately needed some kind of firmer leadership, more even leadership, than they experienced.

This book brings us from the death of Joshua all the way to the life of Samuel, who appears in the very next book that gives us substantial historical coverage; that is, I Samuel. It includes the descriptions of about a dozen judges. Now, we do need to appreciate the fact that these judges are described in different ways and not everything in the book is devoted to the judges. As a matter of fact, the judges are described only from the middle of chapter 3 to the end of chapter 16, and there is more to the book than that. But,

Judges 21:25

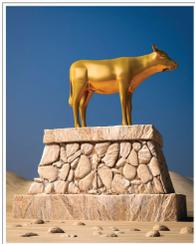
In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

Minor Judges:

Shamgar (3:31)
 Tola (10:1-2)
 Jair (10:3-5)
 Ibzan (12:8-10)
 Elon (12:11-12)
 Abdon (12:13-15)

Major Judges:

Othniel (3:7-11)
 Ehud (3:12-30)
 Deborah (4:1-5:31)
 Gideon (6:1-8:35)
 Jephthah (10:6-12:7)
 Samson (13:1-16:31)



they are central to the story. What we find is that there are a dozen judges listed, but only six of them are described in any detail. Six of the judges, therefore, we call “minor judges” from the Latin word *menor*, which means shorter or smaller. The descriptions of them are much smaller; some of them are just mentioned in a verse or two.

There are the major judges, of whom we have six. Those six major judges Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, tell quite a story. The story that they tell, the story that their acts and activities bring to our attention, is a story of decline. We see the decline, first of all, militarily. The Israelites under Joshua were conquerors, but the Israelites during the days of the judges progressively were less able, not merely to conquer, but even hold on to the territories they had conquered. So there is military decline.

B. Spiritual Decline

There is also spiritual decline; the people are heading off in the wrong direction religiously. What they are doing is worshiping various gods and goddesses, the ones that the local inhabitants have been worshiping for years and that are attractive to the Israelites, or the ones they brought with them from Egypt—like the golden calf, and so on. Worshiping these gods and goddesses, of course, is a direct violation of the Ten Commandments and is going to get them into trouble. So, there is military decline, and there is also spiritual decline. These people are not acting like God’s people; they are not following the covenant, and they are not obeying God’s Law.

C. Religious Decline

In addition, there is also religious decline. Now, we mean by religious decline the formal things that surround spirituality are also going downhill; people are not worshiping like they should. They are not faithfully coming to the central sanctuary where the tabernacle is at Shiloh, or any other location. They are not showing up there as a nation three times a year as they should. They are not teaching the Law to their children. They are not offering sacrifices in the measure that they should. There is military decline, spiritual decline, religious decline, and then there is also moral decline.

They forsook the Lord, the God of their Fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various Gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger because they forsook Him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel.

After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.

D. Moral Decline

Morality is related closely to spirituality and religion, but we mean by moral decline just that their actual behavior as human beings is declining, and these instances of moral decline are described for us in the story we will talk about shortly. It is so easy it seems for a generation to abandon the values of a prior generation. We are told that as long as the Israelites were under Joshua they had done a fairly good job of keeping away from idolatry and all the other trappings of paganism. But once Joshua died, they turned to the things that they found natural to do in the culture of that day. Here are people who came out of the wilderness and have been busy occupying the Promised Land and busy with battles of conquest. They are settled at least to one degree or another. They begin to plant and to harvest; they begin to raise their herds and their flocks; they begin to plant the trees and tend the vineyards, and so on, that living in the land represents.

The Canaanites, the people who were still there in large measure because the conquest was so imperfect as the early chapters of Judges reminds us, were offering sacrifices, were worshiping various gods and goddesses, and were seeming to have success thereby. So the Israelites fell into the same thing and began worshiping this god or that goddess and leaving aside their confidence in the Lord to supply all their needs. It is what typically people do. They have a lack of confidence that their needs will be met by God alone, and so they begin to have faith in some other direction, other gods, other things—whatever it is, they did that.

E. Deuteronomistic Cycle (Jdg 2:7-19)

Something develops that chapter 2 describes for us that we see carried out throughout the book of Judges: it has been labeled the Deuteronomistic Cycle. We see the people of Israel at first in this cycle, which relates to the warnings and descriptions and predictions of the book of Deuteronomy, safe, well, and faithful to God. Then, we see in their complacency, they begin to worship other gods and turn away from the Lord. What does He do? He does exactly what the book of Deuteronomy promises and guarantees He will do—He gives them over into the hands

Deuteronomic Cycle



Deuteronomic Cycle



of their enemies. Their enemies then have success against them militarily, capture parts or large parts of their land, subdue them, put them under harsh treatment, take many things from them—not the least taxes—and then they are oppressed by their enemies. When things are not going so well, then they turn to the Lord and plead for deliverance. They call to Him. He is merciful, so He responds. They turn back to Him and get rid of their idols.

He has sent, in these cases, a judge to be His representative. He raised up somebody to lead them and protect them and deliver them. Usually, as long as the judge lives, in whatever part of the country of Israel the judge had come from, the people there, at least, will be pretty faithful. But, then the judge will die and the people will fall right back into sin again and will turn according to their natural inclinations (to pagan practices), and the cycle will go around again. They will once more be subject to their enemies. This cycle of safety, then disobedience, then subjugation to enemies, then calling out to God for help, and His rescuing them by a judge is called the Deuteronomic Cycle. It is a pattern that we see again and again in the book of Judges and, indeed, it carries on into Samuel and Kings. We will see more of it in these books as well.

II. Deliverance (Jdg 3:5-16:31)

A. Government

One of the things that we observe is that the leadership in these days is a leadership that is “charismatic;” not charismatic with regard to certain gifts of the Spirit as we sometimes hear the term in our day, but charismatic in terms that it is God’s Spirit who is at work. It is the Spirit of God making things happen in these days. There is not otherwise a formal government. It is somewhat along the lines of anarchy, not anarchy in the sense of people rioting in the streets all day long, but anarchy in the sense that there is not much unity among the tribes.

There is not much government and response to government among the people. They are breaking up into small groups. There are rivalries between the tribes beginning to emerge. They are not getting along together, they are not seeing

Localities of the Judges



eye-to-eye, and they are going their own way. As we observe what happens with the various judges, we understand that almost all the judges are so local that they are really only rescuing a part of the people. So a judge leads this tribe against that foe, another judge leads another tribe or maybe a group of tribes against yet another foe. But we do not see much of a picture of the nation as a whole functioning together, working together, and serving God together.

This brings out the need for a true and good king over God's people—not just any king but a true and good king. So the book leads in that direction. There is even the story of an attempt at kingship in chapter 9 by a son of Gideon named Abimelech. That attempt failed, but the book ends with a strong emphasis on the fact that the Israelites really do need a true and good king.

B. Five Major Judges

The judges start with Othniel, and then there is Ehud. Othniel led the people against a foe that we do not know much about called Cushan-Rishathaim, or doubly-evil Cushan. Then Ehud, in chapter 3, against Moab under the king at that time, named Eglon. Ehud succeeds by assassination, not a very pretty picture. It is important to remember that these judges are not necessarily exemplary. God raises them up and He uses them, but they are far from sinless and they certainly are not models for us to follow in much of what they do.

One of the persons who comes closest to being a model is, however, Deborah. She is a terrific judge and she works with her general, Barak, to defeat a coalition of Canaanite kings in the northern part of Israel (that is described for us in chapters 4-5). Then comes Gideon whose faith is weak but who, finally, after testing God, something that is not model behavior, does have the confidence to lead the Israelites into battle against the Midianites.

The next major judge is Jephthah in chapters 10-12. Jephthah, as part of the culture of his day, actually ends up sacrificing his daughter as a token of appreciation to the Lord for success in battle.



Deborah



Samson



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C. Samson, the Sixth Major Judge

The final major judge is Samson in chapters 13-16. By this time, no one will even go with the judge. All the other judges had at least somebody with them; they gathered some troops, maybe only the troops of a single tribe, but at least they had people that they could lead into battle. Samson is alone. Things have gotten so bad that, by the time he has to fight the Philistines, he does all his fighting by himself. He is also not a very moral person even though he has taken a vow to be a Nazirite, which is a specially dedicated person. He breaks those vows, and he gets involved with various women when he should not. He spends lots of time fooling around with the Philistines, who are supposed to be those whom he is fighting. In his tragic story, he is eventually taken prisoner and ends up killing as many people at his death as he did all the rest of his life fighting Philistines. He is in a temple; he is blinded; he is chained to columns; and as he pulls those columns down that supports the roof, a lot of people in the temple get killed. But the story does not end there; it does not end just with that tragedy, with one last judge fighting all by himself using the great powers that God had mercifully given him. It goes on from there downhill, even more of a tragedy.

III. Depravity (Jdg 17:1-21:25)

A. Religious Disorder

We read in chapters 17-18 about the religious disorder in which the Israelites are now led, even by a Levite: making idols and worshiping idols and departing almost completely from faithfulness to God's covenant.

B. Moral Disorder

The last three chapters of the book tell a sad tale. Chapters 19-21 tell the story of another Levite whose concubine (that is, a non-inheriting wife) is raped and murdered at an Israelite town in the tribe of Benjamin called Gibeah. Representatives of the tribe come to the Benjamites and say to them, "Deliver to us for judgment these men from the town of Gibeah in your territory that did this horrible crime." The Benjamites say, "We will not. These are





Benjamites. These are our people. Who are you to tell us to do that?” In other words, their loyalty to themselves within their own tribe is far more important to them than justice and righteousness and cooperation within God’s covenant.

So what happens? The eleven tribes go to war against the one, and you know they are so inept for a long time, they cannot win. Finally, they succeed, and then after having decimated the population of the Benjamites, they come up with a somewhat ridiculous solution to it all. They allow the Benjamites, the men that are left, to capture as their wives women who come to a national festival. The women gather at the festival, and the men have not told them a thing. The Benjamites come out of the bushes, grab women, drag them off, and make them their wives. That is the level of brilliant thinking; that is the level of obedience; that is the level of spirituality to which things had declined in the days of the judges.

IV. Love Demonstrated (Ru 1:1-2:23)

A. Grief, Loyalty, and Conversion

But you know what? There was an exception. That exception centers around the town of Bethlehem, the little town of Bethlehem. It is the exception that is chronicled for us in the book of Ruth. A man from Bethlehem and his wife and their two sons, during a time when there was not much rainfall and there was famine, moved to Moab. The two sons died there and the father died as well. Those left were a woman named Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Naomi heard that things were going better back in Bethlehem where she and her husband and sons had come from, and so determined to return.

The one daughter-in-law, Orpah, kissed her good-bye but the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, stayed with her. Ruth said these words, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go; where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” That is the language of conversion. This woman, Naomi, who had suffered so much, had been such a witness to her daughter-in-law that her daughter-in-law wanted to return with her and worship the God that she worshiped. Ruth



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The Hebrew Bible, Chapter Ruth, in Hebrew
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NAOMI = SWEET



MARA = BITTER



JUDGES



RUTH



grew up in Moab where they worshiped their national god, Chemosh—that god and many other gods and goddesses as well. But so wonderful and effective was the witness of Naomi that Ruth wants to go back with her and say to her “Your God will be my God.” She is going to convert to the worship of the Lord, the true God of Israel.

Naomi at the end of chapter 1 says to the people of Bethlehem as they return, “Do not use my given name, the name Naomi (in Hebrew means “sweet”).” She says, “Call me Mara, because Mara means bitter.” But even in that bitterness she says, “The Lord has caused it.” Naomi understands that God will not give us more than we can bear. Well, it is a wonderful story because it is such an exception to the prevailing situation in the book of Judges.

The general picture in Judges is people being unfaithful and falling into the hands of their enemies and getting themselves into all kinds of trouble, and leaving God, only turning to Him on occasions when they were in terrible difficulty—and then only temporarily. In this story, there is an exception that occurs during the same time period in the days when the judges ruled. We see faithfulness and its outworking.

B. Surprising Kindness

After Ruth and Naomi get to Naomi’s ancestral home, the home that Naomi had left some years earlier, Ruth goes out to take advantage of the gleaning laws. Good Israelites, as there were many in Bethlehem, allowed foreigners—aliens—to go among them and to pick up whatever the harvesters dropped or the things at the edges of the field that could be eaten. Ruth is noticed by a man named Boaz. She is in his field and he notices her. He learns that she is that woman who came from Moab and has converted to faith in the Lord. This impresses him and so he not only instructs his workers to let her have a free hand in gleaning, but he even tells them to leave some good stuff for her to pick up.

He invites her to lunch when all the workers are eating lunch and strikes up a conversation with her. He wants to encourage this woman who has converted to his precious Lord. Once this is known, we see Naomi and Ruth making



some very important decisions.

V. Love Rewarded

A. Ruth's Marriage Proposal

Actually, in the book, the women really know how to operate; they know that a righteous man like Boaz can be trusted. They know the things to initiate, and they make a lot of the key decisions. Trusting in God, they know they can initiate certain kinds of actions that will come to good fruition under God's hand. As time goes by, Ruth, knowing that Boaz is interested in her, is very positive—actually proposes marriage to him. She does this in a non-normal way; she goes and lies down at his feet, showing that she wants to belong to him.

One night when he is sleeping at a threshing floor, staying out and watching the grain to be sure no one comes and steals it during those days when so many raiders did attack the Israelites, he accepts that proposal of marriage. But there is a hitch. Numbers 26 and 31 say when women without husbands marry, they have got to be very careful whom they marry, and the land has to go to the next of kin. There is someone closer to Naomi's family even than Boaz. Fortunately, he does not want to get the land that could come with marrying Ruth, the land that was in Naomi's ancestral family, because he says it would endanger his own inheritance. Presumably, he has already promised a certain amount of land to his sons, and if he married Ruth and had other children it might dilute the amount of land his sons could have.

B. Consolation: New Family

Things work out in such a way, as Boaz faithfully superintends them in the city gate at Bethlehem, that he and Ruth are able to get married. They have a child, and the child is taken by Naomi and nursed. Naomi has the wonderful, deep fulfillment of caring for a child again. She who had been bereft now has a little boy named Obed.

As the book ends, we realize this, in fact, was a story about David's great-great-grandmother. That is what it was



about, because the lineage of the genealogy at the end takes us right down to King David. God was at work in the midst of a tough time, in the midst of a corrupt time, in the midst of a decline—morally, spiritually, militarily, and religiously. With good people faithful to Him, He was able to do things that countered the trends, and that in fact a wonderful part of His overall plan, through David and also down to Christ—the Son of David—of whom Ruth and Naomi are also ancestors.