

Major Ideas in Judges and Ruth

I. *The Patterns in Judges*

- A. **The cycles of Deliverance.** Judges exhibits a pattern of cycles in relation to the history of Israel. This pattern is not completely uniform, some elements are sometimes left out of it, but it serves as a helpful structure to understand how the narrative develops. The pattern is present in the accounts of each major judge.
1. **Idolatry.** The Hebrews sin against God by committing great acts of idolatry and unfaithfulness.
 2. **Oppression.** God sends foreigners to oppress wayward Israel so that they would turn to Him.
 3. **Cry.** The people cry out to God for deliverance from their oppression.
 4. **Judge.** God raises a judge to deliver the people from their oppressors.
 5. **Rest.** There is a period of rest during the lifetime of the judge.
- B. **The downward spiral of Israel.** As the cycles progress, the conduct of the judges and the people get worse. The earlier judges are more positive figures who follow the Lord, but the latter judges lead the people in committing great sins. In this way, Israel and its leaders become increasingly more and more like the Canaanites they are called to expel. This pattern is seen in numerous ways.
1. **Immorality.** The earlier judges served the Lord, the latter judges lead Israel into idolatry and immorality (**Judges 8:27; 9:4; 11:30-40; 14:3; 16:1**).
 2. **Oppression.** The earlier judges liberate Israel from their pagan oppressors, the latter judges oppress Israel themselves (**Judges 8:13-17; 9:26-49; 12:1-6**).
 3. **Rest.** The earlier judges bring rest to the land, indicating a period of faithfulness (**Judges 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28**), the latter judges war against the enemies of Israel but there is no indication that they bring rest or faithfulness.
 4. **Relating the judges.** The author of Judges arranges the stories to give distinctive details that tie the major judges to one another. There are seven major judges. The first three are seen in a mostly positive light, the last three in a mostly negative light, with the middle judge, serving as a bridge that starts more positive but ends negatively. The related judges form mirror images of each other, demonstrating that what was once good in Israel has been twisted to sin.

II. *The Need for a King*

Judges raises the expectations for the coming of a Davidic king. The book clearly alludes to the necessity of a king for Israel to walk faithfully before the Lord (**Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25**). In this way, the degeneracy of the judges and Israel under them serves as a contrast and warning for what the nation was like and would be without a king. The expectation of a king comes to a beautiful fulfillment in the book of Ruth where we see how God provides for the coming of David through His actions during the time of the judges.

The Deterioration of the Era of the Judges Summarized (Judges 1:1-3:6)

I. *Israel's Failure to Expel the Canaanites*

Although Israel served the Lord during the days of Joshua (**Judges 2:7**) they quickly turned from Him after Joshua's death. Chapter 1 details some of the efforts by various tribes to go to war against the peoples of the land. Judah alone acts in accordance with the word of the Lord in going to take conquest and they are also the only tribe who has sustained success. The other tribes meet mostly with defeat and give up in their efforts to conquer the land. Whereas the Lord went before the people to conquer under Joshua and Judah followed suit, the other tribes seem to go to war without regarding the Lord and thus meet with defeat. Sadly, their response is not to turn to the Lord in repentance, as they did after the failure at Ai, but simply to give up the fight and settle with what they already have.

II. *The Angel of the Lord and God's Judgment Against Israel*

The Angel of the Lord, who is the Lord, speaks against Israel for their unfaithfulness. Because they have not sought Him in seeking to cast out the Canaanites and have given up, He gives them over to their sin by making the peoples a snare to them (**Judges 2:2-3**). The author then gives us a summary of the period of the judges (**Judges 2:11-19**). These verses demonstrate both the cycles of deliverance and the downward spiral as each generation becomes worse than their fathers despite the Lord working to deliver them. The people will not be holy to the Lord and worship Him only but give themselves over to other gods and to intermarrying with those who worship them. They have rebelled against the very purpose for which God brought them into the land and have broken God's covenant. Therefore, God brings the curses of the covenant upon them.

The Judging of the Judges (Judges 3:7-16:31)

I. *Othniel (Judges 1:13-15; 3:7-11)*

- A. **Summary.** Othniel is the first judge that we meet and is presented to us as a faithful man. He is a relative of Caleb who is used by the Lord to defeat two of the peoples of the land. Othniel fights for the Lord and brings rest to the land for 40 years.
- B. **Distinctive details.** Othniel gains a faithful wife by his obedience and valor in driving the pagan peoples out. His wife makes a good request of him and he is blessed by his father-in-law.

II. *Ehud (Judges 3:12-30)*

- A. **Summary.** Ehud is raised up in response to the oppression of the king of Moab. He assassinates the king and rouses the people to war against Moab, gaining them 80 years of rest.
- B. **Distinctive details.** Ehud is raised after 18 years of oppression by a people from across the Jordan. He seizes the fords of the Jordan and kills thousands of Moabites who try to cross.

III. *Deborah and Barak (Judges 4-5)*

- A. **Summary.** Deborah was a prophetess who calls upon Barak to go fight against the king of Canaan and the general of his army. Deborah declares that the Lord will give victory, but Barak's hesitancy means that he will not receive the credit, but a woman will. Jael, who is not a native Hebrew, brings victory by killing the general of the Canaanite army and securing 40 years of rest.
- B. **Distinctive details.** A woman brings victory over a Gentile who has been oppressing God's people by crushing his head.

IV. *Gideon (Judges 6-8)*

- A. **Summary.** Gideon is called to deliver Israel from the oppression of Midian. However, like Barak, he is characterized by fear and needs to be assured that God is with Him. The Lord demonstrates His power and presence over and over and gives Gideon a supernatural victory over the Midianites. All this was done to bring glory to God for His deliverance. However, this victory does not result in faithfulness and right worship of God but rather results in idolatry and strife. He judged Israel for 40 years and there was rest.
- B. **Distinctive details.** Throughout his narrative, Gideon seeks assurance apart from God's word. He seeks the miracle of the fleece, the confirmation of the dream, and the guidance of his ephod. In the beginning, Gideon tears down the idols in the midst of the Israelites, but by the end, he has set up a new idol that they worship. In the beginning, Gideon makes war against the Midianites who oppressed Israel, but by the end, he is fighting against Israel as well.

V. *Abimelech (Judges 9)*

- A. **Summary.** Abimelech is one of Gideon's sons who entices the people of Shechem to murder the rest of Gideon's 70 sons. One son escapes and prophesies judgment on both Shechem and Abimelech. The Lord puts enmity between Abimelech and Shechem so that Abimelech utterly destroys Shechem but dies shortly afterward. He judged Israel for 3 years but there was not rest.
- B. **Distinctive details.** A woman brings victory over an Israelite who has been oppressing God's people by crushing his head.

VI. *Jephthah (Judges 10-12)*

- A. **Summary.** After first refusing the cry of Israel for help, the Lord raises Jephthah to deliver them after they put away their idols. Jephthah came from a disgraceful heritage and kept company with disgraceful men. Though the Lord is with him to defeat the Ammonites, he makes a rash vow that results in him committing to sacrifice his daughter. He judged Israel for 6 years but there was not rest.
- B. **Distinctive details.** Jephthah is raised after 18 years of oppression by a people from across the Jordan. He seizes the fords of the Jordan and kills thousands of Israelites who try to cross.

VII. *Samson (Judges 13-16)*

- A. **Summary.** Unlike the previous two judges who came from unseemly births, Samson is the result of a supernatural birth announced by the Angel of the Lord. He is called to be a Nazirite from the womb and is, therefore, to serve the Lord in holiness. However, it is clear from the beginning that Samson does not live in a holy manner. He breaks the terms of his Nazirite vow by taking pagan wives, going in to a harlot, and touching unclean things. He also never goes to battle against the Philistines for the sake of Israel, but only to settle personal scores. This leads to a terrible death. Nonetheless, the Lord used Samson's shortcomings to destroy many of the Philistines. He judged Israel 20 years but there was not rest.
- B. **Distinctive details.** Samson gains pagan wives by living among the pagan peoples. He is betrayed by his father-in-law, who gives his wife to another. His wives make bad requests of him that lead to destruction.

The Depravity of Israel under the Judges (Judges 17-21)

I. *Israel's Idolatry (Judges 17-18)*

- A. **Summary.** The last two accounts in Judges do not chronicle the life of a particular judge but narrate accounts of the life of Israel during the time of the judges. Though the author has told us of the sin of Israel, these accounts allow us to see vividly the extent to which it went. The first account centers on great acts of idolatry. We see the sinfulness of a particular family, where a man steals from his mother, his mother creates an idol dedicated to the Lord, and they set up a cult around the idol. However, these sins are not limited to this family alone. A Levite leaves Bethlehem to come and serve as a priest of the idol to the family and a whole tribe comes to steal away the idol and Levite so that they can worship the idol themselves.
- B. **Distinctive details.** Throughout the account, the name of the Lord is on the lips of the people, but in service to their idolatry. This account is breathtaking in its demonstration of the scope of idolatry in Israel. Not only an individual, but a whole tribe goes after the idol. And a Levite, who is tasked with being a priest to the Lord and guarding His worship, sets himself up as a priest to the idol. The ultimate shock comes at the end of the story when it is revealed that this idolatrous priest is a descendant of Moses. This idolatry persists in Dan throughout the days of Israel, even expanding to include another golden calf (**1 Ki. 12:25-33**), all the way until the time of exile.

II. *Israel's "Canaanization" (Judges 19-21)*

- A. **Benjamin's terrible sin (19).** The second account is no better than the first. A Levite also plays a central role here. He leaves the hospitality of Bethlehem to find great hostility among the Benjamites in Gibeah. The account puts the Benjamites in a most unfavorable light. The Levite had bypassed Jerusalem because it was occupied by Canaanites, but the people of Gibeah show themselves to be grossly immoral, reflecting the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. They are every bit as bad as the Canaanites. Gibeah is the hometown of Saul and the inclusion of its name in the story is a subtle strike at the character of his kingship. Their brutal violation and murder of the Levite's concubine causes all of Israel to gather together against them.
- B. **Israel's civil war (20).** Israel perseveres in bringing the Benjamites to justice and nearly wipes out the tribe. It is at this point that the author wants us to recognize a sad irony. Just as at the beginning of the book, the Lord calls Judah to go to battle first. However, whereas Israel gave up when faced with setbacks against the Canaanites, they persevere in fighting against their own brethren. The implication we are meant to draw is that God would have given the same victory over the Canaanites if they had shown the same humility and perseverance. This account also demonstrates how awful Israel's neglect of warring against the Canaanites was. They are right to fight against the sin committed by Benjamin, but they should have shown an equal, if not greater zeal in fighting against this same sin that characterized the Canaanites. If Israel had been obedient to God's commands instead of making peace with the Canaanites, then this tragedy could have been avoided and the people could have dwelt in peace worshipping the Lord.
- C. **Preserving Benjamin (21).** Israel's solution in finding wives for Benjamin also shows how they were more ready to treat their brothers as Canaanites than the actual people of Canaan. First, it appears they killed not only the men of war but the women and children of Benjamin. Second, they refuse to give their daughters in marriage to the men of Benjamin. Third, they forcefully take women from among Israel to provide wives for Benjamin. These actions were commanded or acceptable to use against the pagan peoples, but Israel only uses it against their brethren.

The Redemption of God in the Time of the Judges (Ruth)

I. *The Ominous Set-Up*

Ruth prepares us for another story of sin and disaster by telling us that the narrative takes place during the time of the judges and by tying it to the last two stories in Judges by starting the account with a man leaving Bethlehem and disaster befalling him and his family. The main themes of unfaithfulness from Judges are there: neglecting the true worship of God, living more comfortably with pagans than with one's own people, and intermarrying with pagans. The marks of God's judgment are also present: famine, death, widowhood, destitution, and lack of ability to carry on the family line.

II. *The Redemptive Twist*

However, God subverts these expectations to bring about His good purposes. In the midst of destitution, God provides fullness. In the midst of an unfaithful people and age, God preserves two from ignoble heritage who prove faithful. In the midst of unholy marriages, God will provide the king Israel has so desperately needed from the unlikely union of an Israelite and Gentile in true faith. God not only brings redemption to the individuals in Ruth but through them will accomplish the redemption of all His people and give them true rest. Departure from the rule of the one from Bethlehem will bring sin and destruction; dwelling under the rule of the one from Bethlehem will bring redemption and blessing.

Applications from Judges and Ruth

I. *Godly Company*

We are called to be in the world but not of the world (**John 17:14-19**) and Judges illustrates the danger of friendship with the world (**James 4:4**). Just as Israel was not to adopt the practices and values of the Canaanites, so we are not to adopt those of the world around us. For this reason, we should regularly seek out the fellowship of the godly rather than the worldly, for that will greatly influence the way we live our lives (**2 Cor. 6:14**). This is most important when it comes to marriage. The Scriptures call us to marry only in the Lord and if we don't, the result is usually great unfaithfulness.

II. *Brotherly Care*

It is sadly the case that family members often reserve their harshest words for each other, and this can also be the pattern in the church. Though we are called to combat error wherever it is found, we need to remember that we are also called to a greater love of the brethren (**Gal. 6:10**). Our greatest strength should not be spent in fighting against fellow believers but must be in striving against those who would stand against the Lord and His church.

III. *Small and Great*

Judges and Ruth teach us the great importance of faithfulness in the small things. Seemingly small unfaithfulness can have dire consequences, while small faithfulness can reap great blessings. We are called to be faithful in little and in much and should be wary of even the smallest sin, but also encouraged that even the smallest step of faithfulness gives glory to God, will bear good fruit, and will be rewarded.