

Judges: Israel's Compromise, II

I would like to lead us in prayer as we start our discussion today.

Father, how we thank You for the privilege that is ours to gather together as believers who have a wonderful bond of friendship and fellowship in You. But more than that we have an assured position before Your throne, a position that is ours by Your grace. And we thank You for that. We thank You for the work of Christ in our lives and for what He has won on our behalf, a prize that we could never have won through our own efforts. And we thank You that because of His work we can now simply rest in Him and out of gratitude do everything that we do in order that He may receive the praise and the glory. Lord, I pray that You would indeed work today in our hearts and minds as we continue our study of the historical books of the Old Testament. We ask that You would enlighten us, that you would focus our attention in the right direction, that You would prepare us not simply by providing information that we then dispense to others, but we ask that You would prepare us by making us better interpreters of Your Word. So we commit this time to You, knowing that You are here in our midst, thanking You for that, and asking that You would help our feeble efforts to explain and to understand. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

In this lecture I want to do three things. First I want to finish the discussion of the book of Judges. Then I want to deal with two debating points. The first debating point is the question of holy war and the genocide of the Canaanites. The second debating point is the issue of the emergence of Israel in Canaan.

As an Old Testament teacher I am always frustrated by the fact that the book of Judges, or even the book of Joshua, could occupy most of a course, if not an entire course. But I do not get to discuss many of the issues that the book raises because of the time constraints of this course. In the last discussion we considered a general introduction to the period of the judges. Specifically we looked at the way in which the early chapters give us an impression of the period as a downward spiral, a decline. We saw how, even in the description of the way in which the Israelites interacted with the Canaanites, there was a downward spiral. They go from allowing some of the Canaanites to survive and dwell in their midst, perhaps being forced into forced labor, to in the end being described as dwelling in the midst of the Canaanites. The final verse of chapter 1 speaks of the boundary of the Amorites, and we would rather have heard about the boundary of the Israelites. It shows the way Israel's faithlessness began to lose their grip on what God had given them in His faithfulness.

Now we want to deal with the structure of the book of Judges. There are three major divisions of the book. There is a prologue at the beginning of the book, an epilogue at the end of the book, and in the middle is the body of the book. The prologue runs from Judges 1:1-3:6 and it describes the incomplete conquest. That is not to say that God had not fulfilled all of His promises. None of their enemies had been able to stand against them. But the people failed in their follow-through, so the conquest was incomplete. They had the upper hand, but they did not capitalize on that by actually occupying those territories. This prologue also describes the reason for the incomplete conquest, which is the people's falling away from the worship of God. It is both the cause and the consequence of allowing the Canaanites to live in their midst. So we have incomplete conquest and a description of the apostasy that both resulted from it and exacerbated the problem as they became more comfortable with the Canaanites living among them.

Then in the middle of the book, from Judges 3:7-16:31, we have a description of the judges. They are sometimes called the major and the minor judges. That does not have to do with how important they

were, but with the amount of material we have on each one. Those about whom we learn a great deal are called “major” judges, and those who are only mentioned in passing are called “minor” judges. There are some who are unhappy with those terms. In this major portion of the book, there is a cyclical pattern that we will discuss in greater detail. There is a reference to oppression of the people, as their sin brings them into a state of oppression. Then there is God’s deliverance of the people.

The epilogue deals with the religious and moral disorder among the people. It is from Judges 17-21. The epilogue parallels what we saw in the prologue. There was a political introduction, related to the incomplete conquest, and a religious description of what resulted from that. In the epilogue we have a description of the religious chaos that characterizes the period of the judges and the moral and political chaos that characterized the period. These were results of the fact that there was no king in Israel and no one was honoring God as king, so everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Of course, when everyone is doing that, society begins to unravel because our own human wisdom is never quite on target.

Let us now look in a more detailed fashion at the outline of the book of Judges. Barry Webb has a commentary on the book of Judges, called *The Book of Judges: an Integrated Reading*, in which he uses some musical terminology to describe different parts of the book of Judges. The overture in a musical piece typically introduces the melodic theme that will become the central thread of the piece; the overture introduces the central theme and then the variations are built upon that recurring melodic, thematic line. So in a symphony, for instance, the variations will continually bring that melodic theme to the forefront, but in different ways that will retain our interest. Then the coda wraps everything up. Thus the overture, variations, and coda correspond respectively to the prologue, body, and epilogue of Judges. It is a helpful description that Webb gives of the overarching structure of the book. We do not merely have a chronological account in the book of Judges. Some of the events that occurred in the coda probably occurred earlier in the period of the Judges, but they were appropriate for tying the themes of the book together and showing the level of religious and political chaos that was reigning supreme during the period.

Looking specifically at the prologue, the first segment runs from Judges 1:1-2:5. This segment describes the incomplete conquest, the people’s gradual loss of their grasp on the land that God had given them and that they were supposed to occupy. Then Judges 2:6-3:6 is the next segment, which expresses the reason for the people’s failure. The reason is their turning from God to follow the gods of the land, which they were supposed to have purged of false worship.

Both of those sections mention the death of Joshua. That should be a clear indication that we do not have simply a chronological account in the book of Judges, because Joshua only died once. His death is mentioned twice because the two sections emphasize different things. The first is focused on the political issues and the declining grasp of the people’s control of the land. The next section is focused on the religious causes of the people’s decline.

Both sections mention toward the end the nations that are left in the land of Israel. In the first section, Judges 2:3 mentions that they were left as “thorns” in the side of the people. The second section, Judges 2:21-22, says that God is going to use the nations to test His people. So God is going to turn something, which should never have been allowed, into something useful. God is a God who works wonders and brings good things even out of bad situations. Then in Judges 3:2 it mentions that God is leaving some of these foreigners in the land to teach His people what they need to learn.

Sadly, the last two verses of the second section, which are the last two verses of the prologue, indicate the extent of Israel's failure. They summarize the entire prologue. Judges 3:5-6 says, "The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons." This is the notion of political compromise, living among the Canaanites, and failure to follow through. But the Scripture goes on to say, "And served their gods." That is a reference to the apostasy of Israel. Thus these last two verses summarize what the whole prologue was about: accommodation, compromise, and falling away to serve other gods.

After the prologue, or overture, to use Webb's terminology, we come to the variations. The cycles of disobedience begin in Judges 3:7. The first report, including the judge Othniel, sets up the cycle that will become the pattern that we will see repeated throughout this section of variations on the theme. Let me read the account that begins in Judges 3:7. "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died." To see how that sets the pattern, consider what Judges 3:12 says. "Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." We will hear that statement many times throughout the book.

The story of Othniel, which is short and not very intriguing as a narrative, is included to give us the structure that will be repeated. What is that structure? Some use the words sin, subjugation, supplication, and salvation. Another scheme uses the words rebellion, retribution, repentance, and restoration. Repentance may not be an accurate term. Sometimes we cry out for help even though we are not really repentant. I prefer the first outline of the structure: sin, subjugation, supplication, salvation. While that cycle repeats, it is not always immediate. In the case of Othniel, it took perhaps 40 years to repeat. I should mention that when we read about a number like 40 years, we know that the judgeships must have overlapped. Remember that we do not have a strict chronological account in the book of Judges. So it is not necessarily the case that Othniel brought peace to the land for 40 years and then the next judge arose. It is clear that, in order to make the chronology fit, we have to assume that there was some overlapping of judgeships. Some of the judges were more prominent in one part of the country than in another, though the effects of the judges are described as for all Israel.

After the introduction of the cycle of judges with the narrative of Othniel, we begin to read about the more interesting descriptions of some of the major judges. The first is Ehud, who is described in chapter 3. There is a parallelism between Ehud, who worked alone, and Samuel, who also worked alone. They accomplished their deliverance—obviously by the power of God—in solo operation.

The next pair that has similarities is Deborah and Jephthah and their similarity is that they are both unusual. Jephthah was unusual by virtue of his birth. Deborah was unusual among the judges by virtue of her gender. Her gender is accented in her account, because she calls upon Barak to lead, but he is afraid to lead. In Judges 4:8 Barak says to Deborah, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you do not go with me, I will not go." Then Deborah says to him in the next verse, "Very well, I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman." It turns out that Jael is the one who kills Sisera, not Deborah, but it is a woman. So

Deborah was a little unusual among the judges. God does that sometimes. He brings the unexpected into prominence for a particular time.

The description of Deborah's rise is not exactly like what is said of the other judges. It does not say, "God raised up a deliverer, Deborah." Rather it says in Judges 4:4, "Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading [or judging] Israel at that time." She is at first described not so much as a judge but as a prophetess. Then she had a judging function in the narrative. It seems that leading Israel at that time had a juridical function. She was making wise decisions for the people. They were appealing to her at that time for judgment in certain areas.

The pivotal judge is Gideon, along with his son Abimelech. So, one way to think about the structure of this central section of the book of Judges is to look at these pairs of judges with Gideon as the central figure. Later I will mention another way to think about the structure of this section.

The epilogue of Judges is from chapter 17 through chapter 21. It has the recurring refrain, "In those days there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Proverbs 4:19 says, "The way of the wicked is like total darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble." Many times when we look at society and see it unraveling, we think it is unraveling because people want to be wicked and want to do evil and want to unravel. But we must realize that they are walking in darkness, without the light of Christ or the light of God's Word. They simply do not know. It is therefore not surprising when they stumble. That was what was happening in the period of the judges. Their behavior is not excusable on that basis. But we should have some sympathy for what it means not to have the light of God's Word in their lives.

There was religious chaos. We read about Micah's idol and the idle Levite in Judges 17. He was a Levite who went looking for a better job. He was someone who, as the Hebrew says, would "fill his hand." He was looking for someone who would give him a little better pay. We read about the Danite migration to the north in Judges 18 and the conquest of a peaceful and unsuspecting people. It is curious that one of the tribes of Israel migrated away from its assigned territory in the land of promise to go outside the land of promise in order to conquer a peaceful and unsuspecting people. They were a people who were not Canaanites and therefore were not under the holy war order. This all shows that things were askew. People were misbehaving and perhaps not knowing what made them stumble.

There was also political chaos. That description begins with the adventures of another Levite, the Levitical nightmare in Israel's own Sodom, which is the city of Gibeah. That city resembles Sodom in many respects. In one sense, however, it compares unfavorably to the city of Sodom. Similar events begin to happen in Gibeah, yet unlike in Sodom, where the divine messengers were able to prevent a horrible thing from happening, in Gibeah the crime is perpetrated. So that narrative in Judges 19 prepares the way for Judges 20, which describes a civil war that ensues. Instead of a conquest of the Canaanites, which is what Israel was supposed to be involved in during this time, they end up in civil war, fighting each other. Then in the last chapter of the book, in order to even things up, because of the rape and the murder of the Levite's concubine in chapter 19, we see rape and murder in Jabesh Gilead and Shiloh. It is rather strange that in trying to prevent one thing they end up doing the same thing. Remember, everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes. God was not honored as king and there was no representative, no theocratic king on the throne.

There are implications to the structure of the book of Judges. That structure, again, is framed by the pairs of judges. Ehud and Samson are paralleled as lone heroes. The next pair is Deborah, being an unusual judge by virtue of her gender, and Jephthah, being an unusual judge by virtue of his outcast

status due to his birth. Then the central element, which is usually the most important element in a chiasmic structure, is Gideon and Abimelech. Gideon is sometimes characterized as the ideal judge and Abimelech is characterized as the anti-judge. I will discuss that pivotal Gideon account a little later.

Another way to outline the structure of Judges is offered by the theologian David Gooding. The reason I mention another chiasmic outline is to point out that sometimes these chiasms we discover in the text are as much a function of the creativity, imagination, and insightfulness of the interpreter as they are intentional elements in the text. Gooding offers a chiasm that does not quite match the one I have described. That does not mean there is no value trying to define the structure. Both outlines point out that the Gideon element is central.

Gooding's outline identifies the prologue and epilogue as parallel components in the chiasm. In the prologue, there is the element of Israel versus the Canaanites, and then in the epilogue is the parallel component of Israel versus Benjamin. Next in the prologue is the element of Israel forsaking Yahweh and serving other gods, which is parallel to the idolatry that is rampant in the epilogue. Levites service idolatrous shrines and the Danites conquer Laish and establish idolatry.

In the central section, Gooding identifies Othniel's Israelite wife as the secret of his success, whereas Samson's foreign women were the secret of his downfall. Ehud takes a message to a foreign king and ultimately finds himself in a position of slaying the Moabites at the fords of the Jordan. That is parallel to Jephthah, who sends messages to a foreign king and slays Ephraimites, who are Israelites, at the fords of the Jordan. The next set of elements is Jael slaying Sisera to end the war, and then "a certain woman" slaying Abimelech to end the war.

In order to come up with this chiasmic structure, or any chiasmic structure, you have to take a text that has many elements and do some reduction and transformation until you can describe one section in a way that you can also describe another section. Even though Gooding's chiasmic structure requires some creativity, I still believe it is useful. It shows us that Gideon and his work is pivotal for our understanding of the book of Judges. His narrative has implications for how we should understand the entire book.

With that in mind, let us now turn our consideration to the Gideon account. We will not have time to consider all of the judges. We do not even have time to discuss all of Gideon's life in detail. I will start with a crucial episode in his life in Judges 8:22-23, one of the most famous verses in the book of Judges because of what Gideon has to say. This is after Gideon has succeeded in delivering his people, and we read, "The Israelites said to Gideon, 'Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian.'" They are saying they want Gideon to be their ruler, which may mean to be a king. Their neighbors had kings, so they may have had that concept in mind. Clearly they wanted a ruler who would establish a dynasty. They mention not only Gideon, but also his son and grandson. In the next verse we read Gideon's response. "But Gideon told them, 'I will not rule over you.'" The Hebrew could mean, "I cannot rule over you," or "I must not rule over you." He goes on to say, "Nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you." This is a very famous verse. Gideon made the good confession. He said the right thing. If the people had been willing to listen, perhaps we would not have had the horrible epilogue of Judges in which there was no king in Israel. The people should have realized that the Lord was indeed king in Israel and they simply needed to turn and listen to Him and obey Him and recall and listen to what He had told them.

While Gideon made the good confession, we have to read what happens next in Judges 8:24-27. "And he said 'I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder.'"—It

was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.—“They answered, ‘We will be glad to give them.’ So they spread out a garment, and each man threw a ring from his plunder onto it. The weight of the gold rings he asked for came to seventeen hundred shekels, not counting the ornaments, the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian or the chains that were on their camels’ necks. Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town.” So having made the good confession, with the people beginning to disperse, Gideon cannot quite let things end there. He asks for that piece of jewelry as a memento of what happened, and out of what he gets he makes an ephod.

We read about a high-priestly ephod, which seemed to be a garment that held a breastplate, on which would have been the twelve stones representing the twelve tribes. Inside of that would have been a pocket that would have held the Urim and Thummim, which was a lot-casting procedure by which the will of God was discerned, because God directs the lots, as the book of Proverbs says. I do not think it means that is how we should determine God’s will today. We have His Word in its fullness. We are meant to go there for direction rather than just throwing the dice. Yet there was a time when God allowed that.

What was the ephod of Gideon like? We were told in Judges 8:27 that “Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.” The Hebrew indicates that Gideon stationed it or stood it in Ophrah. If an ephod is a garment that is worn by the high priest, it is not going to be worn all the time. When he takes it off, since it was an important garment, he did not just stash it in the corner. They probably had something like a mannequin that they would place the ephod around. My theory is that by transference, the mannequin itself came to be called an ephod. So there would be the shape of an idol when dealing with an ephod. It is certainly not clear, but all we know is that the thing Gideon created became a snare to him and his family.

So, the one who is sometimes called the ideal judge is better described as a pivotal judge. He is a judge who tells us something about what is going on in that period. He did not just refuse to rule the people. He did not just request the earrings. He did not just make the ephod out of the gold. As we read on, we find out that Gideon “had seventy sons of his own, for he had many wives.” What does that sound like? He was acting like a king. So even though he refused the request to be king, maybe that planted an idea in his head, for he certainly began living and acting like a king. It was not common, even in those days in which polygamy was acceptable, to have 70 sons and many wives. If you were a king, however, you were powerful enough to do so. Then we even read in Judges 8:31, “His concubine, who lived in Shechem, also bore him a son, whom he named Abimelech.” Notice it said “he named” the son Abimelech, which means “my father is king.” So, even the ideal judge has his flaws.

Remember that the human characters are never the heroes of the Bible. God is the hero of the Bible. We can be thankful for that, because if the human characters were the heroes of the Bible, what chance would we ever have of enjoying God’s good graces. If they were so good that they merited God’s favor, what chance would we have? But they were not “so good.” They were just like we are. They had feet of clay as well.

In thinking about the big picture again, many people have noticed that we have a theme of decline in the overall symmetry of the book of Judges. It moves from Ehud, who was a trickster, to Deborah, who was pretty laudable in most ways, to Gideon, who seems to be a pivotal character, marking a turning point in the book. He goes from turning his hand against his enemies to turning his hand against his own countrymen and creating the idolatrous ephod. We see in the life of Gideon that even the judges

themselves are involved in the decline of the period. Even those God was raising up to deliver His people were themselves compromised.

Then Jephthah leaves much to be desired, as he makes a foolish oath before God. What he says sounds like bargaining rather than prayer. God did what he asked, and Jephthah did what he promised. The account is curious because it tells of Jephthah going in and speaking all his words before the Lord, rather than going in and bowing down before the Lord, or going in and praying before the Lord.

Samson comes next and it is interesting when people try to sanitize the story of Samson to teach it to children. You have to leave out much of the Bible to do that. Samson leaves a great deal to be desired. And it is a reflection of the period that even those whom God was able to raise up and use to deliver His people, and who are even described as heroes of the faith, were less than heroic in many facets of their lives.

How might we describe the central, driving theme of the book of Judges? We should not forget the idea of God's forgiveness. It is easy with a depressing book like Judges to focus on how bad things are. But God continues to be patient with His people and raise up a deliverer time after time. That will not last forever, of course. If that does not work He will do something else to get through to His people. But the patience of God is striking.

If the theme of the book of Joshua were God's conquest, then the theme of Judges is Israel's compromise. God's faithfulness was proven in the book of Joshua. And Israel's faithlessness is proven in the book of Judges. That is certainly applicable to us today. We are faithless. Yet as Paul said, "If we are faithless, He will remain faithful, for He cannot disown Himself." Just as God was patient with the people in the time of the judges, He is patient with us. And we are thankful for that.

As we conclude, I want to discuss one point in Samson's life in some detail. Judges 16:4 says, "Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah." You might wonder why I chose that verse to focus on. It may not seem particularly striking. I mention it because it has something to do with the nature of Old Testament narrative. Remember that we said that Old Testament narratives have very few points of detail that are mentioned simply to mention them. Usually when a detail or a name is given there is some significance to it. There is a reason why one detail is chosen and another is not. Judges 16:4 may be an example of that.

Think of the details of Samson's birth. He was born to be a Nazirite. In the book of Numbers a Nazirite vow included three things that the person must not do. Do not drink wine. Do not touch dead bodies. And do not cut your hair. Consider that Samson was made a Nazirite for life, from birth. Even his mother was told not to drink of the fruit of the vine. As we read the story of Samson, the first oath he broke was in touching the carcass of the lion. And the text tells us that he did not tell his parents what he had done. Presumably, he did not want to be scolded for doing something he was not supposed to do. Later, after considerable cajoling from Delilah, he tells her the secret of his strength is his uncut hair, so they cut his hair and he loses his strength. It was quite foolish for him to tell her that, since he knew she was out to get him, because he had already told her other things and she tried to use them against him. So why would he tell her about his hair if he knew she was out to get him?

Remember he had already broken one vow by touching a dead body. We are not told specifically that he broke the vow against drinking wine, but he did give a wedding banquet, which in Hebrew is called a "drinking party." It indicates that to have a party involved some drinking. We might assume that Samson did some drinking. What we are told, however, in Judges 16:4, is that Samson fell in love with a woman

in the Valley of Sorek. In Hebrew “sorek” means “grapes.” And the woman he falls in love with, of course, is Delilah. People have debated the point, but Delilah at least sounds like a Hebrew word that means “vessel” or “bucket.” I doubt that parents would name their child “Bucket.” But to a Hebrew ear, which is tuned to such things, it might sound significant that Samson went to the Valley of Grapes and fell in love with Bucket. It may be a subtle way of making the point that Samson is on the verge of big trouble. If he has already broken two of the three vows, it may be that he is at the point of doubting whether his strength really does reside in his hair or whether the strength is his own.

It may be that Samson’s sin is leading him to doubt the source of his strength. Our sin has a way of doing that. When we sin and we do not feel the zap of lightning afterward, we may begin to doubt whether God is there or that maybe He is just not very disturbed by it. But we have to remember that God is being patient with us. He does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. Patience is not a sign of lack of power or lack of concern.

One final point I should clarify is the common question about Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter. It is likely that he expected a domestic animal to come meet him, and that is what he was willing to sacrifice. He did not expect it to be his beloved daughter. But another question is whether he really did offer her as a burnt offering, or whether that was just a metaphor for taking away her chance at having a family. The text does say “burnt offering” and we do not have any parallels to lead us to believe it is a metaphoric use. It seems likely to believe that Jephthah, who made an inappropriate vow, continued to be wrong by following through with the vow. Later Saul makes a foolish vow when he says that whoever had done a certain thing would certainly die that day. It turns out to be his son Jonathan, and the people tell him to forget his foolish vow.