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How to use this study guide

Here are a few practical hints for Bible study leaders and participants that should help make your use of this guide better.

1. The book of Judges is long and complex and we will be dealing with large sections of material, sometimes several chapters at once. Time is limited and groups won't be able to read the sections for study aloud together. It is essential therefore that everyone read the material in advance and come prepared. Leaders of the groups should take time however to consider if there are small sections of the Biblical material that could usefully be read to sum up central concerns of the passage. It might also be useful to take two minutes of silence at the start of the study to allow everyone to scan the passage once again to refresh their memories.

2. There are several thorny ethical and theological problems raised by the material in Judges. These should not be avoided. It is important however not to allow those questions to eclipse the purpose of the Biblical writers in including them. Invariably there will be significant teaching points to see if we can discipline ourselves to devote the majority of our time and attention on the overall message of the text, rather than on our particular problem with the text. This will require discipline from the leaders and participants alike, but it will be rewarded with greater understanding of the Biblical message!

Introduction to Judges

The book of Judges follows the events narrated in the book of Joshua. Joshua has led the people of Israel into the land of Canaan and Israel has settled there. However the inhabitants of the land have not been driven out. War and compromise continue to threaten Israel's existence. The task of leading the people has fallen to a group of leaders called the Judges. The title is, of course misleading. A judge immediately conjures up for us the image of court rooms and oak panelling and judicial process and so on. But as Michael Wilcock says of the Judges themselves, "most of them are fighters and adventurers, whose unlikely capers seem far removed from the majestic processes of the law."¹ Nevertheless these 12 Judges were the instruments God used to lead his people. This book records the fate of Israel under their rule.

As a book Judges contains some of the most dramatic and disturbing stories in the Bible (the account of the Levite's concubine in chapter 19 for example) as well as some of the most well known (the stories of Gideon or Samson and Delilah for example). We will be faced with tough ethical dilemmas, deal with the ugliest of atrocities, and enter the uncomfortable world of 'holy war'. The important question, 'can that *really* be right?' will become very familiar to us as we go.

But for that very reason, it's easy for us to miss God's primary message. So it is vital to grasp the 'big picture' and ask ourselves what is the message of the book of Judges? To help us get to that, we need to grasp something of the structure and some of the repeated themes we will discover there.

The first thing to notice about Judges is that it is structured largely around cycles of national rebellion, divine retribution, Israel's repentance, and divine rescue. The refrain of 17:6 and 21:25, '*There was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes*', uncovers the central problem of the book. After Joshua died there was no clear figure to lead the nation. This is the period between the leadership of Moses/Joshua and the leadership of the kings.

The second thing to notice is that the book falls into three unevenly divided sections. The first section (1:1-3:6), we'll call, "No Joshua in the land." It deals with the implications of Joshua's demise for God's people. The second section (3:7-16:31), is entitled, "Judges in the land" and records the ministry of the twelve leaders who arose in that chaotic period. The third section, 'No king in the land' (17:1-21:25) looks at the aftermath of the Judges rule on the people.

When taken together it should not be difficult for us to spot that the 'big picture' message of Judges is focussed on the need for a King. God's purpose for this period in Israel's history was to teach them the depths of their need for such a king, and prepare them for life under his rule when he came. Each of the judges are designed to point to, or illustrate in some way the need for a king to come.

From a New Testament perspective, of course, we know that the perfect King finally has come in the person of Jesus Christ. For us then, the book of Judges is designed to show us once again how much we need the Lordship of Christ over our whole lives if we are to fulfil the mandate given to us (not simply to settle Canaan and drive out its inhabitants, but to make conquest of all the world in obedience to the Great Commission and go making disciples of every nation).

Helpful resources for further study:

Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such a great salvation*, CFP, Ross-shire, 2000

Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Judges*, IVP, Leicester, 1992

Mark Baddely, *Judges: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, Matthaïs Media, www.thegoodbook.co.uk, 2001

¹ Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Judges*, IVP, Leicester, England, 1992, pp 13

No Joshua in the Land: The people wander from God**Study One: An exercise in spiritual geography (Part One)****In advance: Read Judges 1:1-2:5**

Maps are important. Today we mostly use maps to help us navigate and arrive safely wherever we'd like to go. Occasionally, however, we will find maps that indicate where others have already been. Perhaps in your Bible you will find maps that show the routes taken by the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings, or by the Apostle Paul on his missionary journeys.

These two functions of a map come together in this passage. Like a map, it is full of geography. Place names are everywhere. But its design is to show us, not just where Israel went and what they did long ago, but to show us where we must go and how we can arrive there.

It's a passage that both begins and ends with the voice of God. It begins with the LORD's guidance, 1:2. It ends with his rebuke, 2:1-3. Between these two poles is the record of the ongoing conquest of the Promised Land, and the material falls into two sections. Chapter 1:1-21 records the successes of Judah, and 1:22-2:5 we have a record of the failure of the northern tribes. Judah is exemplary. The northern tribes sound a cautionary note.

Into the Word

Look at 1:1-20

1. The tribe of Judah is selected to begin the struggle with the nations living in Canaan. How do you rate their progress? List their military successes.
2. Why was this warfare necessary? (Gen. 15:12-16; Deut. 7:1-6; 9:4-5)
3. What, according to the passage, is the 'secret' of their success? (vs2, 4, 19a)
4. Did Judah fight alone?

Two little vignettes are included in the narrative. Adoni-Bezek (vs7), Othniel and Acsah (vs 12-15) have their stories told. Both illustrate something about the greatness and goodness of God.

5. How does Adoni-Bezek feel about what is happening? (vs7) What does that tell you about God?
6. In the midst of war there is a note of romance. Othniel obviously feels Acsah is worth the risk of attacking Kiriath Sepher for!² God's kingdom is advancing in surprising ways involving even a romance in its progress. What does that tell you about God's character and his relationship with his people?

² Othniel is called Caleb's 'younger brother' here. However this phrase can mean that he was a nephew or even simply a military confederate. See, Davis, "Judges", p22, note 12 for more details.

Think it through

1. Are you comfortable with the idea of God commanding a holy war? What does 'holy war' tell you about the character of God?
2. Read Ephesians 6:10-18. With whom is our warfare today?³
3. If the Christian life is still a battle how should that affect the way we live it? Do you live as though you were daily locked in deadly spiritual combat?
4. Look at your answers to questions 3 and 4 above. What can you learn from Judah that might help you in your struggle with the 'principalities and powers'?
5. Adoni-Bezek was a brutal man. Why is the note of justice that sounds in his words (1:7) important for us today?

Take some time to pray for one another. Pray for God's help in facing the spiritual conflict with boldness and discipline.

³ The reason there is no warrant for 'holy war' today is that Israel, as a national theocracy, was a type of the Kingdom of God to come under Jesus Christ. Thus its warfare pictured the spiritual warfare of God's people with the world, the flesh, and the devil. It also points much further forward to the final judgment when God will judge and condemn all who oppose him. Finally, we should not forget that as a nation Israel was a political entity. It existed and functioned within the accepted parameters of ancient political struggles. The worldwide church today cannot be identified with any national or political institution and its warfare does not reflect any single political stance or agenda.

No Joshua in the Land: The people wander from God**Study 2: An exercise in spiritual geography (Part 2)****Into the Word**

Look at verses 1:20-2:5

Judah set the example, but the northern tribes were not nearly so successful in their campaigns against the Canaanites. After the initial success of the house of Joseph in verses 22-26, things get steadily worse in the conquest of the Promised Land, until, with the Danites, things actually seem to be going backwards.

1. Scan over these verses beginning at verse 19. Can you find a repeated phrase (used eight times!) that characterises the efforts of the northern tribes?
2. Look at verses 28, 30, 33, and 35. These record the military success of the people of God over their enemies. Why are there still notes of spiritual failure? What has Israel failed to do, even though they had the military strength to do it?
3. Why would one commentator say that the failure of the northern tribes 'rings with spiritual emergency'?⁴ What would the consequences be if Israel tolerated the pagan nations in the Promised Land (look at 2:11-13,19; 3:5-6 for example)?
4. What, according of the Angel of the LORD have Israel really done? What judgement does God pronounce on them? (2:1-5)

Think it through

1. Why is compromise in the matter of obeying God's law so serious?
2. In what areas are you tempted to settle for a ceasefire in your spiritual warfare when God demands victory?
3. Can you share any experiences of seemingly harmless compromises bringing serious spiritual consequences in your life?
4. 2:4-5 marks Israel's response to God's word. What was good about their response? Was it enough? (Look ahead in Judges to see if Israel changes its ways!)
5. What does that tell you about dealing with sin properly (2 Corinthians 7:10)?⁵
6. What can you do to make sure that your repentance is always more than mere guilt without change?

Take time now to ask God to help you rest on his Spirit's presence and power, to enable you to live in obedience. And pray for one another, that you might not settle for 'innocent' compromise. Ask for godly sorrow that leads to repentance.

⁴ Davis, Judges, pp24

⁵ When Martyn Lloyd Jones was a pastor in Wales he responded to an accusation of emotionalism by saying, "it is very easy to make a Welshman cry, but it needs an earthquake to change his mind!" Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd Jones: The First Forty Years 1899-1939* (Edinburgh, banner of truth,1982) p 315-16, cited in Davis, *Judges*, p28

No Joshua in the Land: The people wander from God**Study 3: The degeneration generation****Read Judges 2:6-3:6**

Often whole generations are characterised by the pundits as the 'boomers' or 'busters'. More recently we've had 'generation X' and the 'lost generation', and the 'millennial generation'.

In Judges 2:6-3:6 we have 'the degeneration generation.' These are the heirs of chapter 1 who will now reap the spiritual whirlwind that had been sown by their fathers. In many ways this section provides a snapshot of the entire history of the Judges era. The chapter begins by telling us that the generation that followed Joshua into the Promised Land served the LORD for as long as the elders who had been with him were alive. But verse 10 indicates that the next generation "knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel." A case of mass amnesia or something more sinister?

Into the Word

1. In your own words, describe the second generation Israelite's conduct. (vs. 10-13)⁶
2. What factors made the difference between the conduct of the first generation and the conduct of the second?
3. How is it possible that the children of a generation that 'served the LORD' (vs. 7), 'knew neither the LORD or what he had done for Israel' (vs. 10)?
4. In verses 16-23 we read of the alternating responses of God and Israel. In your own words summarise what God did and how Israel reacted.
5. What was God's purpose in treating Israel like this (vs. 22, 3:4)? What was the final outcome (3:5-6)?

Think it through

1. In this passage Israel is faced with a challenge: do they continue to fight for the establishment of the kingdom, or do they accommodate the pagan inhabitants of the land? We too are called to establish the kingdom of God in the world, but as we saw last time, our warfare is spiritual, not military. Nevertheless, the pressures to compromise and back away from the pain and struggle of spiritual combat remain very real. Share some of the ways you feel pressure to accommodate to the world.
2. The godly leaders of the Joshua generation died and the next generation did not follow their example. Read Hebrews 13:7. How should we relate to our leaders?
3. How, according to Hebrews 3:7-14, should we learn from Israel's hardness of heart?

⁶ Note on Baal worship: Baal was the fertility god of Canaanite religion. His consort was Ashtoreth. Fertility (crops and livestock) was vital to the Canaanite lifestyle, and the worship of these two deities was linked to the changing seasons. Sexual union between Baal and Ashtoreth was at the heart of this cycle of seasonal change, and so the worship of these deities involved 'sacred' prostitution and sexual promiscuity in order to 'encourage' the deities to 'get on with it' and bring spring!

4. Does God treat his people today in a similar way to his treatment of them here? What does Hebrews 12:4-13 say about God's use of hardship?
5. How do you customarily respond to hardship? How should you?

Take time now to pray together asking that the Lord would enable you to love your leaders and learn from them, and accept God's discipline and learn from it.

Judges in the Land: God Saves the people

Study Four: Patterns of salvation

Read Judges 3:7-31

Othniel and Ehud (along with Shamgar at the end of the chapter) are the first of the Judges. To be a Judge was not about merely acting to adjudicate in cases of dispute. It was about leading, and usually saving, Israel.

What is fascinating, and disturbing, about these three men is their brilliance and their weakness, their effectiveness and their fallenness. God uses interesting instruments to rescue his people!

Into the word

The career of Othniel in verses 7-11 is the pace setter. It is recounted here at the beginning of the section dealing with the stories of the Judges to show us the ideal. He is the model judge and the judges to follow are to be compared with him.

The career of Ehud however, while no less successful is presented as a contrast designed to shock.

1. You do not need to go over this question in your Bible study group since we will cover the material as we go along in more detail. But to help you see the similarities and differences between these two judges, compare the two accounts briefly. Look at Israel's actions (vs. 7, 12), God's response (vs. 8, 12), Israel's reaction, and God's response (vs. 9, 15), what happens to the judge (vs. 10), what the judge does (vs. 10, 16-28) and what the eventual the outcome is (vs. 11, 28-30).
2. Remembering that God is always a loving God who seeks his people's salvation and restoration, what might God's reasons be for handing Israel over to the rule of pagan nations?
3. Dale Ralph Davis has done an extensive survey of the uses of the Hebrew verb, *za'aq*, translated in verses 9 and 15 as 'to cry out' to the LORD⁷. He concludes that none of them refer to 'repentance', but merely to crying to God for help due to unbearable circumstances⁸. If Israel are not repentant here what does that say about their response to God's discipline?
4. Look again at God's response in both cases. If Israel are crying out not for forgiveness but only for rescue what does God's response say about him?
5. Was Othniel a good choice of judge? Why or why not? (Consider his family pedigree, his spiritual qualifications and the morality of his actions).
6. In verse 15 we are told Ehud was God's chosen deliverer. We also learn he was a left handed man, a detail that is intended to highlight the less than upright character of the man.⁹ How is Ehud's sinister character worked out in the action that follows?
7. Was Ehud a natural choice for a 'deliverer' and judge? What does that tell you about how God works?

⁷ Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges*, p 50

⁸ A hint of the depths of their oppression comes out in the name used for their oppressors in verse 8. Cushan-Rishathaim literally means 'Cushan-double-wickedness'.

⁹ With apologies to those of you who are left handed, the Hebrew text is drawing on an ancient cultural tradition that attributes negative traits to left handed people. Even today however there are traces of that same tradition. The Latin word *sinistra*, from which we derive our word sinister, describing someone of dark and suspect character, refers to the left hand. Likewise in Scots the mocking accusation that something is 'corrie fisted', awkwardly or badly done, is actually a way of saying it is 'left handed'.

Think it through

1. What do these two accounts tell you about the sovereignty of God?
2. We have noticed in previous studies how the LORD disciplines his wayward people. What does the LORD prefer to give his people? (vs 11, vs 30) What is the New Testament equivalent of these blessings? (look for ideas at, for example, John 14:27, 16:33, Act 9:31, Rom. 14:17-19)
3. Shamgar is mentioned briefly in verse 31. Both his background and his methods are unusual. We are not told to which Israelite tribe he belonged. His name is probably not Israelite in origin and Anath is the sun god of the Canaanites. It seems highly likely that Shamgar was not even an Israelite and he fulfilled his calling with an ox goad! Yet “He too saved Israel” (vs. 31) Likewise Ehud(12-30) is a surprise as a saviour. He was little better than an assassin! What do these facts tell you about the kind of people God can use? (Look at 1 Cor. 1:26-31)
4. Othniel was an ideal judge. Ehud and Shamgar were unlikely, albeit effective saviours. Was the great deliverer, Jesus Christ, an ideal saviour or an unlikely saviour? How would the Israelites of his own day have answered that question?
5. Enduring the shame and ignominy of the Cross, Christ’s saving work was at its most improbable and unlikely. Why is it important to remember that salvation comes by the cross and not by displays of mighty power?

Pray now that the Lord would teach us the way of the cross, to be humble in his service, and willing to be used for his glory.

Judges in the Land: God saves the people**Study Five: Our Warrior God****Read Judges 4-5**

The story of Deborah and Barak is, once again, a story about salvation. Israel is back it seems at square one after the period of Ehud. Eighty years of peace (3:30) comes to an abrupt end. Nine hundred iron chariots, the weapons of mass destruction of the ancient near east, were poised to sweep down on any segment of the now oppressed Israelite population. This situation is all very familiar. The writer is attempting to drum home a single, vitally important thought: we never cease to need saving and that salvation belongs to the LORD.

Into the Word

1. Note the familiar themes in the opening 3 verses. What phrases have you met before? What do they indicate about Israel's condition?
2. What does the unoriginality of Israel's condition tell you about the nature of sin?
3. Deborah, the prophetess, is the judge in Israel at this time. Unlike the previous judges she 'out-sources' the task of delivering Israel to Barak. In verses 6-7 she delivers the LORD's message. What does her message say about God?
4. What does verse 8 reveal about Barak? Does he simply trust God's promise of salvation?
5. In verses 9-10 the Israelite army gathers. In verses 12-13 Sisera gathers his army. Battle lines are drawn. The tension mounts! But it is Deborah who finally shouts "Charge!" (vs. 14). According to this verse who is the real deliverer of Israel?
6. While the army is being called up (vs. 9-10) and the Canaanite armoured tank division gets ready for war (vs. 12-13) Heber the Kenite decides to leave his tribe and heads for Zaananim near Kadesh. The battle itself is a smashing victory for the Israelites. But what is the importance of the seemingly incidental detail about Heber's sudden decision to take a family holiday in Kadesh (vs. 17-22)?
7. What does that tell you about the relationship between God's saving work and his providential rule over all the details of life?
8. Why is it surprising that the LORD uses Jael, the wife of Heber (vs11, 17)?¹⁰
9. The episode ends with Deborah and Barak singing a duet of praise to God. List the ways God is described in the passage? Can you see these characteristics on display in the story of chapter 4?

¹⁰ The Kenites were the descendants of Moses father in law (see footnote c in the NIV text). They were not Israelites, and even had a treaty (hence 'friendly relations' with Jabin in vs 17) with Israel's enemy.

Think it through

1. How do you feel about the actions of Jael?
2. Look at 5:24-31. How does God's word 'feel' about them? Were Jael's actions wrong? Why or why not?
3. Has justice been done? (Look for example at 5:30 for some of the ways Sisera and his army behaved).
4. Again and again the emphasis in the story falls on the warrior-work of God. He fights for Israel. He is their true deliverer. One sight of Sisera's military machine, however, and Barak was tempted to doubt that great truth. In what ways are you tempted to doubt that God himself will be your deliverer and salvation?
5. Look back on the judges and deliverers God provided for Israel that we have met so far: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Barak and even Jael. List their different backgrounds and profiles. Where did they come from? How did they behave?
6. What does that say about God?
7. What does that say about the people God may use?
8. How do these unlikely people point to Jesus Christ?

Spend time together praying that the Lord would keep us from the cycle of sinful disobedience, crying out to God and deliverance. Pray instead that the lord would keep us walking constantly with him by keeping us focussed and dependant on our perfect and final Judge and Deliverer, Jesus Christ. God needs provide no other for our sin and weakness.