

The Story Of Salvation

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The Time of the Judges

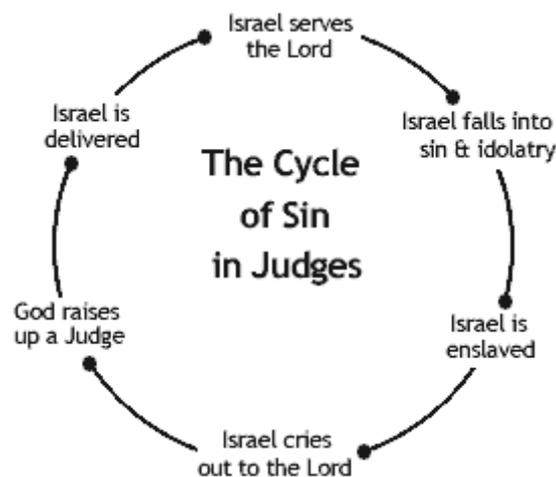
When Joshua was still alive the people served the Lord. He appears not to have trained a successor as he himself was trained by Moses. After his death there was no strong and godly leader to replace him. As other generations rose up, it is recorded that they “did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel” (Judg 2:10). The book shows the failure of Israel to conquer all their enemies, claim their inheritance, and the huge effect that this had on their life and relationship with God. As a result of the loss of visionary leadership, the history of the nation of Israel degenerates into a cycle of disobedience and judgment, summarised in Judges 2:11–23,

¹¹Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshiped the Baals; ¹²and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. ¹³They abandoned the LORD, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. ¹⁴So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. ¹⁵Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them to bring misfortune, as the LORD had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress. ¹⁶Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. ¹⁷Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD; they did not follow their example. ¹⁸Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. ¹⁹But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. ²⁰So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel; and he said, “Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their ancestors, and have not obeyed my voice, ²¹I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died.” ²²In order to test Israel, whether or not they would take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their ancestors did, ²³the LORD had left those nations, not driving them out at once, and had not handed them over to Joshua.

Just before entering the Promised Land Moses had warned Israel not to abandon the Lord for that would bring grave consequences to them and the land (Deut 28). He also said, “For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, turning aside from the way that I have commanded you. In time to come trouble will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands” (Deut 31:29). He then taught them Israel’s national anthem (the song of Moses) that clearly states what God would do if they abandoned Him and went after other gods but the song has also promises of deliverance (Deut 32).

The cycle in the book of Judges proceeds as follows:

1. The people of God came into sorry straits because of their rebellion and idolatry. This is simply stated as “the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (Judg 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6 & 13:1).
2. God punishes Israel by using idolatrous nations to tyrannise Israel (Judg 2:14; 3:8; 4:2 & 10:9).
3. The Israelites repent and cry to the Lord for deliverance from their enemies (Judg 3:9, 15; 6:6–7; 10:10).
4. The Lord raises up a leader called “judge” to deliver his people from their bondage and oppression (Judg 2:16; 3:9, 15; 10:1, 12).
5. A time of peace is followed. But when the judge died the people went back to their idolatry and the cycle repeated itself. (Judg 3:10–11; 8:28–32; 10:2–5; 12:9–15).



The following table shows only the important Judges where the enemy, the years of oppression, and the years of rest are given.¹

Enemy	Years of Oppression	Judge	Deliverance and Rest	Scripture reference
From Mesopotamia	8	Othniel	40	3:7–11
The Moabites	18	Ehud	80	3:12–31
The Canaanites	20	Deborah	40	4:1–5:31
The Midianites	7	Gideon	40	6:1–8:28
The Ammonites	18	Jephthah	6	10:6–12:7
The Philistines	40	Samson	20	13:1–16:31

Contrary to some interpretations this cycle includes the good and the bad. Within the big picture painted above we find a sequence of extraordinary individual acts of deliverance. Notice that the times of deliverance and peace were far greater than the years of oppression. That there were still very godly people around is born out by the love story of Boaz and Ruth “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1).

The Judges

¹ Diagram and table from: <http://www.jesusplusnothing.com/studies/online/judges1.htm>

In the midst of a nation in decline there is a collection of hero stories in which God raised up charismatic and courageous leaders to rescue a repentant nation. These leaders are named judges, a better translation would be “warrior-rulers”. The judges were essentially ad hoc military deliverers, whom God raised up in times of political and military oppression to deliver the nation, “the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them” (Judg 2:16). It is recorded that Deborah was the only leader in the book who held court to which the people came “to have their disputes decided” (Judg 4:5 NIV). The book states that each judge “judged Israel” for a number of years. Does that mean that they all held court like Deborah? Or rather that they were raised up to “judge” Israel’s enemies, to execute the judgement of God upon the idolatrous neighbour nations? Or were they raised up by God to call Israel back to the covenant? Most likely all of the above.

What is important is to note that whenever God’s people repented from their wicked ways and called upon him, He never failed to open his arms in love to his people. It seems that they could not sin themselves out of God’s hand. Through the 15 judges of the nation God remained faithful to his own promises to Abraham to protect and bless his offspring and to the promises made in Deuteronomy 30.

The judges were not self-appointed or elected leaders. They were people whom “the LORD raised up” (Judg 2:16, 18; 3:9, 15). They were people of the Spirit of God. Seven times we read that “the Spirit of the Lord” came upon them or possessed them.²

At one level these stories of deliverance are success stories. After Ehud’s assassination of Eglon and the subsequent military victory, the land had rest for eighty years (Judg 3:30). Three times there were periods of peace for 40 years (See table above). By any political standard these are remarkable successes. Elsewhere we read of enemies “subdued”³ and about the nation “delivered”.⁴ The fact that some of the judges themselves displayed severe character flaws or that during the peaceful times of the judges, and especially after their deaths, the nation slipped back into idolatry and moral decline does not negate the genuine achievements of people.

The courageous Gideon

After Deborah’s and Barak’s victory over the Canaanites there were 40 years of peace in the land. The Israelites again turned away from God and He gave them over into the hands of the Midianites and Amelakites. Israel was brought very low and they cried out to God. The Lord sent an unknown prophet who retold the story of the exodus. God then chose Gideon, a young man from an otherwise unremarkable clan from the tribe of Manasseh, to free the people of Israel and to condemn their worship of idols. Gideon is slow to recognise the angel of the Lord who appears in the wine press where he was beating out wheat. The angel called him a man of valor and commanded him to save Israel. Very unsure of both himself and God’s command, he requested proof of God’s will by two miracles, the famous fleece tests, “in order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand.”

The Lord then instructed him to destroy the town’s altar to the foreign god Baal and the symbol of the goddess Asherah. He did that and was almost killed by the townsfolk. He was saved by the wisdom of his father who said to the men, “Will you contend for Baal? Or will you defend his cause? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been pulled down.” Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, ‘Let Baal contend against him,’ because he

² Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19 & 15:14.

³ Judges 3:30; 4:23; 8:28 & 11:33.

⁴ Judges 2:16, 18; 3:9, 31; 6:9; 7:2; 8:22 & 10:12.

pulled down his altar” (Judg 6:28–32). He then gathered an army from the various tribes including his own and to engage the armed forces of their enemies for battle. However, God informed Gideon that the men he had gathered were too many – with so many men, there would be reason for the Israelites to claim the victory as their own instead of acknowledging that God had saved them. God first instructed Gideon to send home those men who were afraid. 22,000 soldiers left for home and 10,000 remained. But the Lord said to Gideon,

“The troops are still too many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there...⁵ So he brought the troops down to the water; and the LORD said to Gideon, “All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side.”⁶ The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water.⁷ Then the LORD said to Gideon, “With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand (Judg 7:4–7).

Under cover of darkness God instructed Gideon to do some spying in the Midianite camp. Gideon overheard a Midianite man tell a friend of a dream in which God had given the Midianites over to Gideon. He worshipped God for His encouragement and revelation. Gideon returned to the Israelite camp and gave each of his men a trumpet and a clay jar with a torch hidden inside. Divided into three companies, Gideon and the three hundred marched on the enemy camp. There they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars and shouted, “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!” The LORD set every man’s sword against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled and were pursued and annihilated. After the victory the Israelites pleaded with Gideon to be their king, but he refused, telling them that only God was their ruler. Sadly, however, he carries on to make an “ephod” out of the gold won in battle, which causes the whole of Israel again to turn away from God. There was peace in Israel for forty years during the life of Gideon.

Samson

Undoubtedly Samson is the most famous judge in the book. On the one hand there is a man with a passion for God. Like Elizabeth in the N.T. Manoah’s wife was barren. But God intervened miraculously and she gave birth to Samson. He was a man blessed with heroic strength. Even as a young man the Spirit of God rested upon him (Judg 13). On the other hand he was a man with many flaws. He ends up blind, his eyes gouged out, grinding grain around and around the Philistine prison mill (Judg 16:21). He becomes an image of Israel, a flesh and blood metaphor of a people who lose sight of God.

His flaws are multiple: reckless, weak-willed, self-indulgent (“I saw a Philistine woman at Timnah...Get her for me, because she pleases me”), sensual, over-confident, self-reliant, bad company, misplaced trust and broken vows. In view of his giftedness, Samson is a case study on how to squander God’s gifts. But that is only half the story. He is a great hero. After 40 years of Philistine occupation and oppression he delivered Israel from their arch enemy. For all his human weakness, we read repeatedly that “the Spirit of the Lord” came upon Samson. Twice we are told that he judged Israel for 20 years. God answered his prayer for a return of his strength for a final victory, which happened in the temple of the Philistine god Dagon. He was brought out of prison and stood before all the lords of the Philistines. They said, “Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand. When the people saw him, they praised their god; for they said, “Our god has given our enemy into our hand” (Judg 16:23–24). But Samson brought the temple down and more were killed that day than during his life. Not only did Samson die, but it is ironic that the so-called mighty Dagon was crushed as well beneath the rubble. In case we are in any doubt that the story of Samson is a story of success as well as

failure, we find him included in the roll call of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 together with Gideon, Barak, and Jephthah.

Pictures of violence, abuse, decadence and apostasy

Throughout the book, “the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD”. In other words, they did what was right in their own eyes (Judg 17:6). Early in the book we read of the defeat of the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the capture of their king Adoni-bezek. They cut off his thumbs and big toes. This king had cut off thumbs and toes of seventy other kings. He said, “as I have done, so God has paid me back” (Judg 1:6–9). We read of assassinations: Ehud’s gruesome murder of king Eglon thrusting a home-made sword into his belly (Judg 3) and the killing of the commander of the Canaanite king, named Sisera. When fleeing from the victorious Israelite’s army he hid in a tent thinking he was safe. But the woman took a hammer and tent peg and drove the peg into his temple (Judg 4:17–22). Even the great Gideon led Israel into idolatry. Then the evil Abimelech, one of Gideon’s sons, slaughtered 70 of his brothers. Later Abimelech’s skull was crushed by an unnamed woman throwing a rock on his head. He was then killed by his armour-bearer avoiding the shame of being felled by a woman (Judg 9). We read of the shameful sacrifice of Jephthah’s own daughter. Samson, whose eyes were gouged out, sacrifices himself, the Levite sacrifices his wife, which became a catalyst for Israel to nearly destroy the entire tribe of Benjamin. The closing chapters of the book are especially revealing of Israel’s decadence and apostasy. They paint a horrendous picture of the nation: idolatry, prostitution, homosexuality, a gross gang-rape, tribal war in which many thousands were killed and mass kidnapping. The picture is one of total abandonment of moral restraint. There was anarchy. The book concludes with the observation, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg 21:25).

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