

16 The Times of the Judges

This lesson looks at the 7th book of the Old Testament, called "Judges".

From Egypt

The people of Israel came out of Egypt. After many years they finally reached the land of Canaan, where they settled. The people built houses, cities and farms. When the people took over Canaan, Joshua was the leader. After Joshua died, God did not choose a new leader. Israel had no central government. It had no capital city. Each tribe looked after its own affairs. The elders in each tribe solved the problems, and the priests and the Levites (people from the tribe of Levi) taught the people about God and His Law.

It was the covenant (or agreement) that they had with God kept the people together. There was a "Tent of Meeting" at Shiloh where the people would come together each year to worship God and to remember how God had helped them in the past.

Life was not easy for the Israelites. The people were separated by mountains and rivers; there were not many roads to travel on. There were still Canaanite people in the land who did not like the Israelites. The Canaanites often had good weapons to fight against the Israelites. The Israelites had to fight with anything they could find.

Who were the "Judges"?

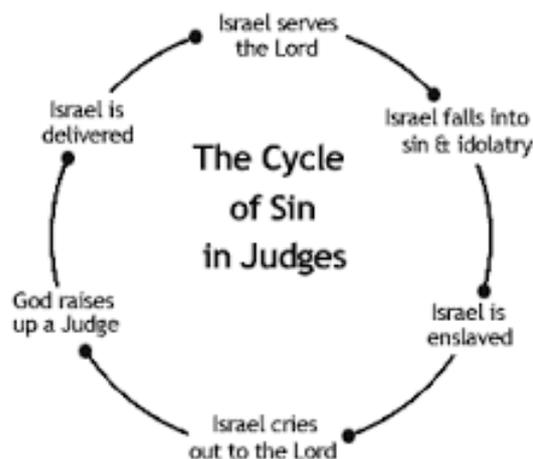
The Judges were special leaders whom God chose to help the Israelites at this time. They were leaders, but when the Bible was translated from Hebrew to English many years ago, the translators used the word "judge", and this word has stayed to this day. In Modern English, a judge is a person who sits in a court and decides if a person is guilty or innocent. The judges of Israel did not do much of this. Mostly, these judges were good at fighting Israel's enemies.

Why were the Judges needed?

God had promised the Israelites that if they obeyed His Law, He would protect them from their enemies. But if they did not obey His Law, then God would send their enemies to attack. God had said:

If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you this day that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the Lord destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 8:19-20)

It is sad to say that soon after the Israelites came to Canaan, they forgot what God had done for them. They started to look at the gods of the Canaanites. They thought that these gods could help them with their farming. Soon, they were bowing down to these statues of wood and stone. The people did not obey God's Law and worship Him only. So God punished the people by sending the Canaanites to attack, and win.



The Israelites would then cry out to God to save them. God would send a "judge" to defeat their enemies and lead the people back to the worship of God.

This happened many times in the book of Judges. Israel went backward and forward worshipping the gods of Canaan, and God saving them when they were in trouble, and then worshipping God again.

The names of the Judges are recorded in the table to the right. We shall look at one Judge: Gideon. If you have time, you could read about other judges.

Gideon

Gideon was the most famous Judge. He was chosen by God to save the Israelites from the people known as Midianites. The Midianites were a nomadic people who rode in from the desert on camels, destroying crops and animals. The Israelites were terrified of the Midianites, and they would hide in the mountains when the Midianite army came.

Gideon was able to destroy the Midianite army with God's help. He sent messengers to the other Israelites to help. In the end, he chose 300 men to fight against an army with thousands of soldiers. The Bible tells how one night Gideon and his men surrounded the Midianite army while they were sleeping. At a signal from Gideon, the three hundred men blew trumpets, held up fire torches and shouted as loud as they could. The Midianites thought a huge army was there, and they were so terrified that they started to kill each other. Many more ran back to their own country. The power of Midian was broken, and there was peace in Israel for 40 years.

Many years later, the New Testament part of the Bible talked about the bravery of the Judges. It says that they could do all these great things because they believed that God would help them. We have to learn that God will help us. Not to fight battles, but to keep us safe, and to bring us to the Kingdom of God to come soon on the earth.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed (i.e. defeated) foreign armies. (Hebrews 11:32-34)

The Judges ¹	
Name	Years of service ²
Othniel	40
Ehud	80
Shamgar	-
Deborah	40
Gideon	40
Abimelech	3
Tola	23
Jair	22
Jephthah	6
Ibzan	7
Elon	10
Abdon	8
Samson	20
Eli	40

1 The Judges led the Israelites during the period 1420 to 1000 B.C. (circa)

2 This column gives the years of service of each judge during the periods of peace.