

**JUDGES  
FOR YOU**

EDITED FROM THE STUDY BY  
TIMOTHY KELLER

# JUDGES FOR YOU



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## **Judges For You**

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## SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Judges For You*:

**To read.** You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

**To feed.** You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

**To lead.** You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

This is not a series of commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can identify them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, for both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

*Carl Laferton, Series Editor*

## INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES

*“Whatever controls us really is our god ... The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life.”*

*(Rebecca Manley Pippert, Out of the Saltshaker, page 48-49)*

We live and work among a great variety of gods—not only those of other formal religions, but also the gods of wealth, celebrity, pleasure, ideology, achievement. Our era can be characterized by the phrase which sums up the book of Judges: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25, ESV).

So despite the gap of over three millennia, there are many parallels between our situation and the time of the book of Judges, which recounts the history of God’s people, Israel, between the time of Moses and Joshua, and that of the first kings—around 1200BC. This was a time of spiritual pluralism. The society of Canaan—the land God had promised to give his people, and where they were now living intermingled with other nations—was a mixture of believing and pagan people. It was a time when God’s people daily faced the choice between looking to God as their Lord, or following the spirit and preferences of their age. It is mainly the story of how they failed in this task—of how they constantly turned from knowing, loving and obeying God to do “what was right in [their] own eyes.”

And so Judges can be described as “despicable people doing deplorable things” and as “trashy tales about dysfunctional characters.” As the history unfolds even the “heroes,” the judges, become increasingly flawed and failing. They do many appalling things, and their efforts have less and less redemptive effect. It is a dismal story—and it is all history. So the reader will be led to ask, again and again: *What in the world is this doing in the Bible?*

The answer is an important one—it is the gospel! The book of Judges shows us that the Bible is not a “Book of Virtues”; it is not full of inspirational stories. Why? Because the Bible (unlike the books

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on which other religions are based) is not about following moral examples. It is about a God of mercy and long-suffering, who continually works in and through us despite our constant resistance to his purposes. Ultimately, there is only one hero in this book, and he’s divine. When we read this part of Scripture as a historical recounting of

how God works to rescue his undeserving people through, and out of, the mess their sin brings them into, then it comes alive to us in our heads and hearts, and speaks into our own lives and situations today. Judges is not an easy read. But living in the times we do, it is an essential one.

So what are the main themes—or, we might say, truths about God—that the writer of Judges wants us to learn and live by? here are six, by way of introduction, to look out for as we go through:

1. *God relentlessly offers his grace to people who do not deserve it, or seek it, or even appreciate it after they have been saved by it.* The book of Judges is not about a series of role models. Though there are a few good examples (eg: Othniel, Deborah), they are early on in the book, and do not dominate the narrative. The point is that the only true savior is the Lord. Judges is ultimately about grace abounding to chief sinners. God’s grace will triumph over the stupidest actions.
2. *God wants lordship over every area of our lives, not just some.* God wanted Israel to take the entire land of Canaan, but instead they only cleared out some areas and they learned to live with idols in their midst. In other words, they neither wholly rejected God nor wholly accepted him. This halfway discipleship and

compromise is depicted by the book of Judges as an impossible, unstable compound. God wants all of our lives, not just part.

3. *There is a tension between grace and law, between conditionality and unconditionality.* We find in Judges a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, God demands obedience because he is holy. On the other hand, he makes promises of commitment and loyalty to his people. Will his holiness and his conditional commands (*Do this and then I'll do this*) override his promises (*I will always be with you, no matter what you do*), or will his promises override his commands? Put it this way—are his promises conditional, or unconditional? Judges is crucial, in that it shows that neither answer to that question is right. Nearly all readers of the Old Testament take a “liberal” view (*Sure, God will always bless us as long as we are sorry*) or a “conservative” view (*No, God will only bless us if we are obedient*). Judges leaves us with a tension—that both are true, but neither are fully true—and it will not resolve the tension. But it is that tension that propels the narrative. Only the New Testament gospel will show us how the two sides can be, and are, both true.

Are God's promises conditional or unconditional? Judges shows neither answer is right.

4. *There is a need for continual spiritual renewal in our lives here on earth, and a way to make that a reality.* Judges shows that spiritual decline is inevitable, and spiritual renewal then becomes the continual need. We will see a regular, repeated decline-revival cycle. Some of the elements in this renewal include repentance, prayer, the destruction of idols, and anointed human leaders. Renewal happens when we are under the right master/ruler; slavery occurs when we are under the wrong master/ruler. Judges is the best book in the Old Testament for the understanding of renewal



and revival, while Acts is the best place in the New Testament. Watch, though, for the way that the revival cycles in Judges become weaker and weaker as time goes on, while in Acts they grow wider and stronger.

5. *We need a true Savior, to which all human saviors point, through both their flaws and strengths.* As we noted above under #1, the increasing magnitude of evil and brokenness in the narrative points us to our need of a savior, not role models. But the decreasing effectiveness of the revival cycles and the decreasing quality of the judges point us to the failure of any human savior. The judges themselves begin to point us to someone beyond them all. In Othniel we learn that God can save through all, in Deborah that he can save through many, in Gideon that he can save through few, and in Samson that he can save through one. God will save by sending the One.
6. *God is in charge, no matter what it looks like.* The most pervasive theme may be the easiest to miss! God often seems almost absent from the scene in Judges, but he never is. He works out his will through weak people, and in spite of weak people. His purposes are never thwarted, regardless of appearances. The mills of God may grind slow, but they grind exceeding fine.

Of course, a book of this length cannot deal fully with every verse of a book of Judges' length. I have interacted with various interpretations of some particularly strange, tricky or controversial passages. One of the biggest problems the modern reader has with Judges (and Joshua) in particular, and the Old Testament in general, is God's order to Israel to "drive out" the inhabitants of Canaan from their homeland; since this is a very difficult issue, and one which underlies the whole book of Judges, I've laid out some thoughts in an appendix, which you'll find on page 211.

As we go through, I'll point at times to the structure both of the book as a whole, and the episodes within it; on pages 207-209, you'll

find some resources to help you see the general structure, who the different judges were and how they were similar and different, at a glance; and on page 210, there is a map showing all the places where the key action happens.

But mostly, I've tried to let the narrative speak for itself (the stories, while often depressing and sometimes disturbing, are always exciting and unpredictable); and to draw out the ways we are being pointed to Jesus, the ultimate Judge, and being shown how to live lives which are honoring and pleasing to him among our pluralistic societies today.



# 1. HALF-HEARTED DISCIPLESHIP

The book of Judges begins by looking backwards, and ends by looking forwards. This period of Israel's history opens: "After the death of **Joshua\***" (1:1<sup>†</sup>); its final words strain toward the age of monarchy, of Saul, David, Solomon and their successors: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (21:25). To understand and appreciate the great peaks and troughs, the triumphs and (more often) the tragedies of the time of the judges, we must begin by looking over our shoulders, as 1:1 encourages us to do.

## **The Promise-Keeping God**

Joshua was **Moses'** God-chosen successor to lead the people of Israel (Numbers 27:12-23). He was one of only two men in the whole generation that had been rescued from **Egypt** who had remained faithful in trusting God's promises to bring his people to the promised land of **Canaan** (Numbers 14:30). So he and Caleb (who we meet later in Judges 1) were the only two who escaped God's judgment of death in the desert, and were able to enter the promised land.

The book of Joshua charts God's work in and through his people to keep his promises to them, to bring them into the land, to defeat their enemies, and to begin to give them blessing and rest. It is a book which teaches us that, since God always keeps his promises, God's people can bravely obey and worship him. It is also a book which sets the scene for Judges.

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\* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 199).

† All Judges verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

At the beginning and end of Joshua, God gives specific directions to Joshua and the people which provide us with a yardstick to measure their progress in Judges 1. First, God tells them the dimensions of the land “I will give you” (Joshua 1:3-4). Second, he reminds them that their **LORD**-dependent military advances must be accompanied by a close and humble spiritual life—a walk with God. They must “be careful to obey all the law ... meditate on it” (v 7, 8). Victory and rest will come because they are the dependent, obedient people of God; they will not become the people of God through achieving victory and rest for

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themselves. They are not to expect success if they do not accompany all their work with obedience to God as they **meditate** on his word and trust in his promises.

The book of Joshua records the beginning of this process of entering and taking the land. For the most part, the people obediently trust

God; and God grants them victory. But as Joshua nears the end of his days, there is still much to be done. The land lies open to Israel; but they still need to settle it, trusting God to push out the current inhabitants.

The people still need to trust God to keep his promises, and so bravely obey him: “You will take possession of [this] land, as the **LORD** your God promised you. Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the **Book of the Law**” (23:5-6).

One outworking of this promise-relying-obedience—what we could call covenant faithfulness—is that Israel must not enter into **covenants** with other nations, serve their gods, or intermarry with them (23:7, 12). The purpose for driving out the Canaanites is not vengeful or economic, but spiritual. They are to be removed so that Israel will not fall under their religious influence—“you are to hold fast to the **LORD** your God, as you have until now” (v 7). They were to build a home country to serve God in, a land where surrounding nations would be able to see the true God through the lives of his people.

## Brave Spirituality

God's call to his people (then and now) is to combine spirituality with bravery. True **discipleship** is radical and risk-taking, because true disciples rely on God to keep his promises to bless them, and not on their own instincts, plans, or insurance policies.

It is hard to be truly *brave* without faith in God. The kind of bravery that does not arise out of faith in God is adventurism, or macho heroism, or plain cruelty. It can be rooted in insecurity, or a desperation to prove oneself, or hopelessness. Only faith-based bravery will walk the line between atrocities on the one side, and cowardice and ineffectiveness on the other.

Faith in God's promises means not always following the expected, rational path. As Joshua dies, it will take real faith to conduct this campaign in the way God wishes. On the one hand, the Israelites can never turn back from fighting any people-group in Canaan, no matter how much stronger they are than Israel. Ordinary military policy dictates that you don't fight superior armies over whom you have no advantage, numerically or technologically. On the other hand, Israel cannot simply plunder and enslave any people-group in Canaan, no matter how much weaker they are than the Israelites. Ordinary military policy dictates that you don't go to the trouble of driving out people who aren't dangerous and who you can dominate and exploit economically. Who Israel chooses to fight, and how Israel responds to victory, will show whether they are truly trusting in the promises—whether they are really obeying the LORD.

## Judges, at last!

The opening chapter of Judges, read in light of and measured against the yardstick of the book of Joshua, is a narrative masterpiece. God's verdict on the progress of the Israelites will not (as we'll see) come until the beginning of chapter 2. But the narrative itself shows us that Israel, at this point, is faithful but flawed. The foundations are being

laid—and though they are strong in parts, they begin to erode from the outset.

Chapter 1 tracks the successes (and otherwise) of nine of the **tribes of Israel**. Much of the focus falls on Judah, since God says they are to be the first to complete the conquest of their allotted territory (**v 2**).

Almost immediately, Judah fails. “Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, “Come up with us ... to fight” (**v 3**). This is common sense, militarily. But it is faithlessness, spiritually. God’s word was “Judah is to go”—Judah fails fully to obey. They go, but they do not go alone. Their discipleship is half-way.

Nevertheless, having gone up as directed, “when Judah attacked, the LORD gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands” (**v 4**). They rout the inhabitants, and capture and kill Adoni-Bezek (“the Lord of Bezek”), who recognizes the rightness of this judgment on him (“God has paid me back for what I did to them,” **v 7**). It is notable that, while many 21st-century readers have many qualms about Israel’s conduct in Canaan, this defeated Canaanite did not. God’s judgment throughout history is to give people over to the consequences of the life they have chosen (eg: Psalm 64:3-4, 7-8; Romans 1:21-32)—Adoni-Bezek, it appears, accepts this.

Having won this victory, Judah continues to take their inheritance (**Judges 1:8-11, 17-18**). Between the record of these victories, the

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narrator narrows the focus to one spiritually brave family in Israel—the family of faithful Caleb. Here, in miniature, is what all Israel should be like. Caleb offers his daughter to a man “who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher” (**v 12**). What he wants for Acsah is the life he has

chosen for himself; one of covenant faithfulness, of courageous obedience in response to God’s promises. “Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, took it” (**v 13**).

Acsah then shows that she is her father's daughter. Her urging of her new husband, Othniel, to ask Caleb for a field (v 14), and her own request to Caleb to "give me also springs of water" (v 15), displays her desire to take, settle in and enjoy the blessings of the promised land. Caleb, Othniel (who we'll meet again in 3:1-6) and particularly Acsah each show us whole-hearted discipleship. In this sense, they—and the Kenites (1:16), distant relatives of Israel who nevertheless "went up ... to live among the people of the Desert of Judah"—stand as a rebuke to the rest of the people. As will often be the case in this book (as well as among God's people today) it is the unlikely and the outsider—a woman and the Kenites—who display real, radical faith.

## Common Sense

If chapter 1 finished with **verse 18**, it would be almost completely encouraging, and bode well for the rest of Judges. But **verse 19** jars. "The LORD was with the men of Judah"—and yet "they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots." Judah does not trust in God's strength, so they measure their own strength against their enemies', and fail to push the chariot-owning plain-dwellers out of the land.

Common, but faithless, sense, begins to prevail here. Judah doesn't trust God; and so they don't secure their inheritance so that they can worship God without compromise. The remaining Canaanites will prove to be a thorn in their side for centuries to come.

It is not our lack of strength that prevents us from enjoying God's blessings, or from worshiping God wholeheartedly; it is our lack of faith in *his* strength. When we rely on ourselves, and base our walk with God on our own calculations instead of simply obeying, we find ourselves making decisions like the Judaites. Othniel attacked a city in God's strength; the tribe of Judah concluded they could not do likewise in their own. It is halfway discipleship, and Judges will show us that it leads to no discipleship at all. The warning to us is clear!



## Nor, Neither, Nor

The contagion of half-hearted obedience, of half-belief in God's promises, spreads. The tribe of Benjamin fails "to dislodge the Jebusites" (v 21). The house of Joseph makes covenants with a Canaanite, instead of trusting God's covenant promises (v 22-26). Manasseh fails to drive out various inhabitants, and then when they are strong enough, decides to exploit them as forced labor (v 27-28). The reason implied is that it made more economic sense and required less effort to enslave them than to drive them out. Convenience trumps obedience.

Ephraim allows Canaanites to live among them (v 29). Zebulun opts for forced labor (v 30). The people of Asher fare still worse; instead of allowing Canaanites to live among them, they live among Canaanites (v 31-32), as does Naphtali (v 33). Lastly, the tribe of Dan become "confined ... to the hill country" (v 34). What matters in **verse 36** is not the borders of the allotted inheritance of Israel, but the border of the Amorites, the areas where they "were determined ... to hold out" (v 35). Here, there is no claim of greater military resources or numbers. Rather, the reason given is superior will-power and tenacity—superior courage. God's people have become less brave than the people who do not know him.

In many ways, and at first reading, this is a chapter of great conquest. Israel lives in the promised land, and has settled great areas of it. Two generations previously, as the Israelites suffered under the yoke of slavery in Egypt, they could not have dreamed that this would be the lives their grandchildren lived. But—and it is a big "but"—Israel has not fully trusted or obeyed. And the Israelites now live alongside **idol**-worshiping Canaanites. Like buried mines, these idols lie dormant in Judges 1, ready to explode in the spiritual lives of God's people.

## Questions for reflection

1. Can you think of times in your life when you have been brave because of your faith?
2. When do you find it hardest to follow God's commands instead of your own "common sense." Why?
3. Think of areas of your life where you are enjoying "success." Are you still radically relying on God and obeying him in those areas?