

The Book Of Judges

A Book About
Heroes, Sin
And Consequences

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Judges

OVERVIEW: REAL heroes are hard to find these days. Modern research and the media have made the foibles and weaknesses of our leaders very apparent; we search in vain for men and women to emulate. The music, movie, and sports industries produce a steady stream of “stars” who shoot to the top and then quickly fade from view.

Judges is a book about heroes—12 men and women who delivered Israel from her oppressors. These judges were not perfect; in fact, they included an assassin, a sexually promiscuous man, and a person who broke all the laws of hospitality. But they were submissive to God, and God used them.

Judges is also a book about sin and its consequences. Like a minor cut or abrasion that becomes infected when left untreated, sin grows and soon poisons the whole body. The book of Joshua ends with the nation taking a stand for God, ready to experience all the blessings of the Promised Land. After settling in Canaan, however, the Israelites lost their spiritual commitment and motivation. When Joshua and the elders died, the nation experienced a leadership vacuum, leaving them without a strong central government. Instead of enjoying freedom and prosperity in the Promised Land, Israel entered the dark ages of her history.

Simply stated, the reason for this rapid decline was sin—individual and corporate. The first step away from God was incomplete obedience (Judges 1:11-2:5); the Israelites refused to eliminate the enemy completely from the land. This led to intermarriage and idolatry (Judges 2:6-3:7) and everyone doing “as he saw fit” (Judges 17:6). Before long the Israelites became captives. Out of their desperation they begged God to rescue them. In faithfulness to his promise and out of his loving-kindness, God would raise up a judge to deliver his people and, for a time, there would be peace. Then complacency and disobedience would set in, and the cycle would begin again.

The book of Judges spans a period of over 325 years, recording six successive periods of oppression and deliverance, and the careers of 12 deliverers. Their captors included the Mesopotamians, Moabites, Philistines, Canaanites, Midianites, and Ammonites. A variety of deliverers—from Othniel to Samson—were used by God to lead his people to freedom and true worship. God’s

Deliverance through the judges is a powerful demonstration of his love and mercy toward his people.

As you read the book of Judges, take a good look at these heroes from Jewish history. Take note of their dependence on God and obedience to his commands. Observe Israel's repeated downward spiral into sin, refusing to learn from history and living only for the moment. But most of all, stand in awe of God's mercy as he delivers his people over and over again.

THE BLUEPRINT

A. THE MILITARY FAILURE OF ISRAEL (Judges 1:1-3:6)

The tribes had compromised God's command to drive out the inhabitants of the land. Incomplete removal of evil often means disaster in the end. We must beware of compromising with wickedness.

1. Incomplete conquest of the land

2. Disobedience and defeat

Judges 1:1-3:6

After Joshua died, the Israelites asked the Lord, "Which tribe should attack the Canaanites first?"

[2] The Lord answered, "Judah, for I have given them victory over the land."

[3] The leaders of Judah said to their relatives from the tribe of Simeon, "Join with us to fight against the Canaanites living in the territory allotted to us. Then we will help you conquer your territory." So the men of Simeon went with Judah.

[4] When the men of Judah attacked, the Lord gave them victory over the Canaanites and Perizzites, and they killed ten thousand enemy warriors at the town of Bezek. [5] While at Bezek they encountered King Adoni-bezek and fought against him, and the Canaanites and Perizzites were defeated.

[6] Adoni-bezek escaped, but the Israelites soon captured him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. [7] Adoni-bezek said, "I once had seventy kings with thumbs and big toes cut off, eating scraps from under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them." They took him to Jerusalem, and he died there.

[8] The men of Judah attacked Jerusalem and captured it, killing all its people and setting the city on fire. [9] Then they turned south to fight the Canaanites living in the hill country, the Negev, and the western foothills. [10] Judah marched against the Canaanites in Hebron (formerly called Kiriath-arba), defeating the forces of Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi. [11] From there they marched against the people living in the town of Debir (formerly called Kiriath-sepher).

[12] Then Caleb said, "I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the one who attacks and captures Kiriath-sepher." [13] Othniel, the son of Caleb's younger brother Kenaz, was the one who conquered it, so Acsah became Othniel's wife.

[14] When Acsah married Othniel, she urged him to ask her father for an additional field. As she got down off her donkey, Caleb asked her, "What is it? What can I do for you?"

[15] She said, "Give me a further blessing. You have been kind enough to give me land in the Negev; please give me springs as well." So Caleb gave her the upper and lower springs.

[16] When the tribe of Judah left Jericho, the Kenites, who were descendants of Moses' father-in-law, traveled with them into the wilderness of Judah. They settled among the people there, near the town of Arad in the Negev.

[17] Then Judah joined with Simeon to fight against the Canaanites living in Zephath, and they completely destroyed the town. So the town was named Hormah. [18] In addition, Judah captured the cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron, along with their surrounding territories.

[19] The Lord was with the people of Judah, and they took possession of the hill country. But they failed to drive out the people living in the plains because the people there had iron chariots.

[20] The city of Hebron was given to Caleb as Moses had promised. And Caleb drove out the people living there, who were descendants of the three sons of Anak. [21] The tribe of Benjamin, however, failed to drive out the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem. So to this day the Jebusites live in Jerusalem among the people of Benjamin.

[22] The descendants of Joseph attacked the town of Bethel, and the Lord was with them. [23] They sent spies to Bethel (formerly known as Luz), [24] who confronted a man coming out of the city. They said to him, "Show us a way into the city, and we will have mercy on you."

[25] So he showed them a way in, and they killed everyone in the city except for this man and his family. [26] Later the man moved to the land of the Hittites, where he built a city. He named the city Luz, and it is known by that name to this day.

[27] The tribe of Manasseh failed to drive out the people living in Bethshan, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, Megiddo, and their surrounding villages, because the Canaanites were determined to stay in that region. [28] When the Israelites grew stronger, they forced the Canaanites to work as slaves, but they never did drive them out of the land.

[29] The tribe of Ephraim also failed to drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, and so the Canaanites continued to live there among them.

[30] The tribe of Zebulun also failed to drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron and Nahalol, who continued to live among them. But they forced them to work as slaves.

[31] The tribe of Asher also failed to drive out the residents of Acco, Sidon, Ahlab, Aczib, Helbah, Aphik, and Rehob. [32] In fact, because they did not drive them out, the Canaanites dominated the land where the people of Asher lived.

[33] The tribe of Naphtali also failed to drive out the residents of Bethshemesh and Beth-anath. Instead, the Canaanites dominated the land where they lived. Nevertheless, the people of Bethshemesh and Beth-anath were sometimes forced to work as slaves for the people of Naphtali.

[34] As for the tribe of Dan, the Amorites forced them into the hill country and would not let them come down into the plains. [35] The Amorites were determined to stay in Mount Heres, Aijalon, and Shaalbim, but when the descendants of Joseph became stronger, they forced the Amorites to work as slaves.

[36] The boundary of the Amorites ran from Scorpion Pass to Sela and continued upward from there.

[2:1] The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim with a message for the Israelites. He told them, "I brought you out of Egypt into this land that I swore to give your ancestors, and I said I would never break my covenant with you. [2] For your part, you were not to make any covenants with the people living in this land; instead, you were to destroy their altars. Why, then, have you disobeyed my command?

[3] Since you have done this, I will no longer drive out the people living in your land. They will be thorns in your sides, and their gods will be a constant temptation to you." [4] When the angel of the Lord finished speaking, the Israelites wept loudly. [5] So they called the place "Weeping," and they offered sacrifices to the Lord.

[6] After Joshua sent the people away, each of the tribes left to take possession of the land allotted to them. [7] And the Israelites served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the leaders who outlived him—those who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel.

[8] Then Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110. [9] They buried him in the land he had inherited, at Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

[10] After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel. [11] Then the Israelites did what was evil in the Lord's sight and worshiped the images of Baal. [12] They abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt.

They chased after other gods, worshiping the gods of the people around them. And they angered the Lord.

[13] They abandoned the Lord to serve Baal and the images of Ashtoreth.

[14] This made the Lord burn with anger against Israel, so he handed them over to marauders who stole their possessions. He sold them to their enemies all around, and they were no longer able to resist them. [15] Every time Israel went out to battle, the Lord fought against them, bringing them defeat, just as he promised. And the people were very distressed.

[16] Then the Lord raised up judges to rescue the Israelites from their enemies. [17] Yet Israel did not listen to the judges but prostituted themselves to other gods, bowing down to them. How quickly they turned away from the path of their ancestors, who had walked in obedience to the Lord's commands.

[18] Whenever the Lord placed a judge over Israel, he was with that judge and rescued the people from their enemies throughout the judge's lifetime. For the Lord took pity on his people, who were burdened by oppression and suffering. [19] But when the judge died, the people returned to their corrupt ways, behaving worse than those who had lived before them. They followed other gods, worshiping and bowing down to them. And they refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

[20] So the Lord burned with anger against Israel. He said, "Because these people have violated the covenant I made with their ancestors and have ignored my commands, [21] I will no longer drive out the nations that Joshua left unconquered when he died. [22] I did this to test Israel—to see whether or not they would obey the Lord as their ancestors did." [23] That is why the Lord did not quickly drive the nations out or allow Joshua to conquer them all.

[3:1] The Lord left certain nations in the land to test those Israelites who had not participated in the wars of Canaan. [2] He did this to teach warfare to generations of Israelites who had no experience in battle. [3] These were the nations: the Philistines (those living under the five Philistine rulers), all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the hill country of Lebanon from Mount Baal-hermon to Lebo-hamath.

[4] These people were left to test the Israelites—to see whether they would obey the commands the Lord had given to their ancestors through Moses.

[5] So Israel lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, [6] and they intermarried with them. Israelite sons married their daughters, and Israelite daughters were given in marriage to their sons. And the Israelites worshiped their gods.

B. THE RESCUE OF ISRAEL BY THE JUDGES

(Judges 3:7-16:31)

Repeatedly we see the nation of Israel sinning against God and God allowing suffering to come upon the land and the people. Sin always has its consequences. Where there is sin we can expect suffering to follow. Rather than living in an endless cycle of abandoning God and then crying out to him for rescue, we should seek to live a consistent life of faithfulness.

1. First period: Othniel
2. Second period: Ehud and Shamgar
3. Third period: Deborah and Barak
4. Fourth period: Gideon, Tola, and Jair
5. Fifth period: Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon
6. Sixth period: Samson

Judges 3:7-16:31

The Israelites did what was evil in the Lord's sight. They forgot about the Lord their God, and they worshiped the images of Baal and the Asherah poles. [8] Then the Lord burned with anger against Israel, and he handed them over to King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim. And the Israelites were subject to Cushan-rishathaim for eight years.

[9] But when Israel cried out to the Lord for help, the Lord raised up a man to rescue them. His name was Othniel, the son of Caleb's younger brother, Kenaz. [10] The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he became Israel's judge. He went to war against King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram, and the Lord gave Othniel victory over him. [11] So there was peace in the land for forty years. Then Othniel son of Kenaz died.

[12] Once again the Israelites did what was evil in the Lord's sight, so the Lord gave King Eglon of Moab control over Israel. [13] Together with the Ammonites and Amalekites, Eglon attacked Israel and took possession of Jericho. [14] And the Israelites were subject to Eglon of Moab for eighteen years.

[15] But when Israel cried out to the Lord for help, the Lord raised up a man to rescue them. His name was Ehud son of Gera, of the tribe of Benjamin, who was left-handed. The Israelites sent Ehud to deliver their tax money to King Eglon of Moab. [16] So Ehud made himself a double-edged dagger that was eighteen inches long, and he strapped it to his right thigh, keeping it hidden under his clothing. [17] He brought the tax money to Eglon, who was very fat. [18] After delivering the payment, Ehud sent home those who had carried the tax money.

[19] But when Ehud reached the stone carvings near Gilgal, he turned back. He came to Eglon and said, "I have a secret message for you." So the king commanded his servants to be silent and sent them all out of the room. [20] Ehud walked over to Eglon as he was sitting alone in a cool upstairs room and said, "I have a message for you from God!" As King Eglon rose from his seat, [21] Ehud reached with his left hand, pulled out the dagger strapped to his right thigh, and plunged it into the king's belly. [22] The dagger went so deep that the handle disappeared beneath the king's fat. So Ehud left the dagger in, and the king's bowels emptied. [23] Then Ehud closed and locked the doors and climbed down the latrine and escaped through the sewage access.

[24] After Ehud was gone, the king's servants returned and found the doors to the upstairs room locked. They thought he might be using the latrine, [25] so they waited. But when the king didn't come out after a long delay, they became concerned and got a key. And when they opened the door, they found their master dead on the floor.

[26] While the servants were waiting, Ehud escaped, passing the idols on his way to Seirah. [27] When he arrived in the hill country of Ephraim, Ehud sounded a call to arms. Then he led a band of Israelites down from the hills. [28] "Follow me," he said, "for the Lord has given you victory over Moab your enemy." So they followed him. And the Israelites took control of the shallows of the Jordan River across from Moab, preventing anyone from crossing.

[29] They attacked the Moabites and killed about ten thousand of their strongest and bravest warriors. Not one of them escaped. [30] So Moab was conquered by Israel that day, and the land was at peace for eighty years.

[31] After Ehud, Shamgar son of Anath rescued Israel. He killed six hundred Philistines with an ox goad.

[4:1] After Ehud's death, the Israelites again did what was evil in the Lord's sight. [2] So the Lord handed them over to King Jabin of Hazor, a Canaanite king. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-haggoyim. [3] Sisera, who had nine hundred iron chariots, ruthlessly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.

[4] Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet who had become a judge in Israel. [5] She would hold court under the Palm of Deborah, which stood between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to settle their disputes. [6] One day she sent for Barak son of Abinoam, who lived in Kedesh in the land of Naphtali. She said to him, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: Assemble ten thousand warriors from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun at Mount Tabor. [7] I will lure Sisera, commander of Jabin's army, along with his chariots and warriors, to the Kishon River. There I will give you victory over him."

[8] Barak told her, "I will go, but only if you go with me!"

[9] "Very well," she replied, "I will go with you. But since you have made this choice, you will receive no honor. For the Lord's victory over Sisera will be at the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. [10] At Kedesh, Barak called together the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand warriors marched up with him. Deborah also marched with them.

[11] Now Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Moses' brother-in-law Hobab, had moved away from the other members of his tribe and pitched his tent by the Oak of Zaananim, near Kedesh.

[12] When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, [13] he called for all nine hundred of his iron chariots and all of his warriors, and they marched from Harosheth-haggoyim to the Kishon River.

[14] Then Deborah said to Barak, "Get ready! Today the Lord will give you victory over Sisera, for the Lord is marching ahead of you." So Barak led his ten thousand warriors down the slopes of Mount Tabor into battle. [15] When Barak attacked, the Lord threw Sisera and all his charioteers and warriors into a panic. Then Sisera leaped down from his chariot and escaped on foot. [16] Barak chased the enemy and their chariots all the way to Harosheth-haggoyim, killing all of Sisera's warriors. Not a single one was left alive.

[17] Meanwhile, Sisera ran to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because Heber's family was on friendly terms with King Jabin of Hazor. [18] Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come into my tent, sir. Come in. Don't be afraid." So he went into her tent, and she covered him with a blanket.

[19] "Please give me some water," he said. "I'm thirsty." So she gave him some milk to drink and covered him again.

[20] "Stand at the door of the tent," he told her. "If anybody comes and asks you if there is anyone here, say no."

[21] But when Sisera fell asleep from exhaustion, Jael quietly crept up to him with a hammer and tent peg. Then she drove the tent peg through his temple and into the ground, and so he died.

[22] When Barak came looking for Sisera, Jael went out to meet him. She said, "Come, and I will show you the man you are looking for." So he followed her into the tent and found Sisera lying there dead, with the tent peg through his temple.

[23] So on that day Israel saw God subdue Jabin, the Canaanite king. [24] And from that time on Israel became stronger and stronger against King Jabin, until they finally destroyed him.

[5:1] On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:

[2] "When Israel's leaders take charge,

and the people gladly follow—
bless the Lord!

[3] "Listen, you kings!
Pay attention, you mighty rulers!
For I will sing to the Lord.
I will lift up my song to the Lord, the God of Israel.

[4] "Lord, when you set out from Seir
and marched across the fields of Edom,
the earth trembled
and the cloudy skies poured down rain.

[5] The mountains quaked at the coming of the Lord.
Even Mount Sinai shook in the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel.

[6] "In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, and in the days of Jael,
people avoided the main roads,
and travelers stayed on crooked side paths.

[7] There were few people left in the villages of Israel—
until Deborah arose as a mother for Israel.

[8] When Israel chose new gods,
war erupted at the city gates.
Yet not a shield or spear could be seen
among forty thousand warriors in Israel!

[9] My heart goes out to Israel's leaders,
and to those who gladly followed.
Bless the Lord!

[10] "You who ride on fine donkeys
and sit on fancy saddle blankets, listen!
And you who must walk along the road, listen!

[11] Listen to the village musicians gathered at the watering holes.
They recount the righteous victories of the Lord,
and the victories of his villagers in Israel.
Then the people of the Lord
marched down to the city gates.

[12] "Wake up, Deborah, wake up!
Wake up, wake up, and sing a song!

Arise, Barak!

Lead your captives away, son of Abinoam!

[13] "Down from Tabor marched the remnant against the mighty.

The people of the Lord marched down against mighty warriors.

[14] They came down from Ephraim—a land that once belonged to the Amalekites,

and Benjamin also followed you.

From Makir the commanders marched down;

from Zebulun came those who carry the rod of authority.

[15] The princes of Issachar were with Deborah and Barak.

They followed Barak, rushing into the valley.

But in the tribe of Reuben

there was great indecision.

[16] Why did you sit at home among the sheepfolds—

to hear the shepherds whistle for their flocks?

In the tribe of Reuben

there was great indecision.

[17] Gilead remained east of the Jordan.

And Dan, why did he stay home?

Asher sat unmoved at the seashore,

remaining in his harbors.

[18] But Zebulun risked his life,

as did Naphtali, on the battlefield.

[19] "The kings of Canaan fought at Taanach near Megiddo's springs,

but they carried off no treasures of battle.

[20] The stars fought from heaven.

The stars in their orbits fought against Sisera.

[21] The Kishon River swept them away—

that ancient river, the Kishon.

March on, my soul, with courage!

[22] Then the horses' hooves hammered the ground,

the galloping, galloping of Sisera's mighty steeds.

[23] 'Let the people of Meroz be cursed,' said the angel of the Lord.
'Let them be utterly cursed

because they did not come to help the Lord,
to help the Lord against the mighty warriors.'

[24] "Most blessed is Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite.
May she be blessed above all women who live in tents.

[25] Sisera asked for water,
and Jael gave him milk.

In a bowl fit for kings,
she brought him yogurt.

[26] Then with her left hand she reached for a tent peg,
and with her right hand she reached for the workman's hammer.
She hit Sisera, crushing his head.

She pounded the tent peg through his head, piercing his temples.

[27] He sank, he fell,
he lay dead at her feet.

[28] "From the window Sisera's mother looked out.
Through the window she watched for his return, saying,
'Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why don't we hear the sound of chariot wheels?'

[29] A reply comes from her wise women,
and she repeats these words to herself:

[30] 'They are dividing the captured goods they found—
a woman or two for every man.

There are gorgeous robes for Sisera,
and colorful, beautifully embroidered robes for me.'

[31] "Lord, may all your enemies die as Sisera did!
But may those who love you rise like the sun at full strength!"

Then there was peace in the land for forty years.

[6:1] Again the Israelites did what was evil in the Lord's sight. So the Lord handed them over to the Midianites for seven years. [2] The Midianites were so cruel that the Israelites fled to the mountains, where they made hiding places for themselves in caves and dens. [3] Whenever the Israelites planted their crops,

marauders from Midian, Amalek, and the people of the east would attack Israel, [4] camping in the land and destroying crops as far away as Gaza. They left the Israelites with nothing to eat, taking all the sheep, oxen, and donkeys. [5] These enemy hordes, coming with their cattle and tents as thick as locusts, arrived on droves of camels too numerous to count. And they stayed until the land was stripped bare. [6] So Israel was reduced to starvation by the Midianites. Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.

[7] When they cried out to the Lord because of Midian, [8] the Lord sent a prophet to the Israelites. He said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of slavery in Egypt [9] and rescued you from the Egyptians and from all who oppressed you. I drove out your enemies and gave you their land. [10] I told you, 'I am the Lord your God. You must not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you now live.' But you have not listened to me."

[11] Then the angel of the Lord came and sat beneath the oak tree at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash of the clan of Abiezer. Gideon son of Joash had been threshing wheat at the bottom of a winepress to hide the grain from the Midianites. [12] The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, "Mighty hero, the Lord is with you!"

[13] "Sir," Gideon replied, "if the Lord is with us, why all this has happened to us? And where are all the miracles our ancestors told us about? Didn't they say, 'The Lord brought us up out of Egypt'? But now the Lord has abandoned us and handed us over to the Midianites."

[14] Then the Lord turned to him and said, "Go with the strength you have and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you!"

[15] "But Lord," Gideon replied, "how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!"

[16] The Lord said to him, "I will be with you. And you will destroy the Midianites as if you were fighting against one man."

[17] Gideon replied, "If you are truly going to help me, show me a sign to prove that it is really the Lord speaking to me. [18] Don't go away until I come back and bring my offering to you."

The Lord answered, "I will stay here until you return."

[19] Gideon hurried home. He cooked a young goat, and with half a bushel of flour he baked some bread without yeast. Then, carrying the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, he brought them out and presented them to the angel, who was under the oak tree.

[20] The angel of God said to him, "Place the meat and the unleavened bread on this rock, and pour the broth over it." And Gideon did as he was told. [21] Then the angel of the Lord touched the meat and bread with the staff in his hand, and fire flamed up from the rock and consumed all he had brought. And the angel of the Lord disappeared.

[22] When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the Lord, he cried out, "Sovereign Lord, I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!"

[23] "It is all right," the Lord replied. "Do not be afraid. You will not die." [24] And Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and named it "The Lord Is Peace." The altar remains in Ophrah in the land of the clan of Abiezer to this day.

[25] That night the Lord said to Gideon, "Take the second best bull from your father's herd, the one that is seven years old. Pull down your father's altar to Baal, and cut down the Asherah pole standing beside it. [26] Then build an altar to the Lord your God here on this hill, laying the stones carefully. Sacrifice the bull as a burnt offering on the altar, using as fuel the wood of the Asherah pole you cut down." [27] So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord had commanded. But he did it at night because he was afraid of the other members of his father's household and the people of the town. He knew what would happen if they found out who had done it.

[28] Early the next morning, as the people of the town began to stir, someone discovered that the altar of Baal had been knocked down and that the Asherah pole beside it was gone. In their place a new altar had been built, and it had the remains of a sacrifice on it. [29] The people said to each other, "Who did this?" And after asking around and making a careful search, they learned that it was Gideon, the son of Joash.

[30] "Bring out your son," they shouted to Joash. "He must die for destroying the altar of Baal and for cutting down the Asherah pole."

[31] But Joash shouted to the mob, "Why are you defending Baal? Will you argue his case? Whoever pleads his case will be put to death by morning! If Baal truly is a god, let him defend himself and destroy the one who knocked down his altar!" [32] From then on Gideon was called Jerubbaal, which means "Let Baal defend himself," because he knocked down Baal's altar.

[33] Soon afterward the armies of Midian, Amalek, and the people of the east formed an alliance against Israel and crossed the Jordan, camping in the valley of Jezreel. [34] Then the Spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon. He blew a ram's horn as a call to arms, and the men of the clan of Abiezer came to him. [35] He also sent messengers throughout Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, summoning their warriors, and all of them responded.

[36] Then Gideon said to God, "If you are truly going to use me to rescue Israel as you promised, [37] prove it to me in this way. I will put some wool on the threshing floor tonight. If the fleece is wet with dew in the morning but the ground is dry, then I will know that you are going to help me rescue Israel as you promised." [38] And it happened just that way. When Gideon got up the next morning, he squeezed the fleece and wrung out a whole bowlful of water.

[39] Then Gideon said to God, "Please don't be angry with me, but let me make one more request. This time let the fleece remain dry while the ground around it is wet with dew." [40] So that night God did as Gideon asked. The fleece was dry in the morning, but the ground was covered with dew.

[7:1] So Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and his army got up early and went as far as the spring of Harod. The armies of Midian were camped north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. [2] The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to me that they saved themselves by their own strength. [3] Therefore, tell the people, 'Whoever is timid or afraid may leave and go home.' "Twenty-two thousands of them went home, leaving only ten thousand who were willing to fight.

[4] But the Lord told Gideon, "There are still too many! Bring them down to the spring, and I will sort out who will go with you and who will not."

[5] When Gideon took his warriors down to the water, the Lord told him, "Divide the men into two groups. In one group put all those who cup water in their hands and lap it up with their tongues like dogs. In the other group put all those who kneel down and drink with their mouths in the stream."

[6] Only three hundred of the men drank from their hands. All the others got down on their knees and drank with their mouths in the stream. [7] The Lord told Gideon, "With these three hundred men I will rescue you and give you victory over the Midianites. Send all the others home." [8] So Gideon collected the provisions and rams' horns of the other warriors and sent them home. But he kept the three hundred men with him.

Now the Midianite camp was in the valley just below Gideon. [9] During the night, the Lord said, "Get up! Go down into the Midianite camp, for I have given you victory over them! [10] But if you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah. [11] Listen to what the Midianites are saying, and you will be greatly encouraged. Then you will be eager to attack."

So Gideon took Purah and went down to the outposts of the enemy camp. [12] The armies of Midian, Amalek, and the people of the east had settled in the valley like a swarm of locusts. Their camels were like grains of sand on the seashore—too many to count! [13] Gideon crept up just as a man was telling his friend about a dream. The man said, "I had this dream, and in my dream a loaf of barley bread came tumbling down into the Midianite camp. It hit a tent, turned it over, and knocked it flat!"

[14] His friend said, "Your dream can mean only one thing—God has given Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite, victory over all the armies united with Midian!"

[15] When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he thanked God. Then he returned to the Israelite camp and shouted, "Get up! For the Lord has given you victory over the Midianites!"

[16] He divided the three hundred men into three groups and gave each man a ram's horn and a clay jar with a torch in it. [17] Then he said to them, "Keep your eyes on me. When I come to the edge of the camp, do just as I do. [18] As soon as my group blows the rams' horns, those of you on the other sides of the camp blow your horns and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon!' "

[19] It was just after midnight, after the changing of the guard, when Gideon and the one hundred men with him reached the outer edge of the Midianite camp. Suddenly, they blew the horns and broke their clay jars. [20] Then all three groups blew their horns and broke their jars. They held the blazing torches in their left hands and the horns in their right hands and shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" [21] Each man stood at his position around the camp and watched as all the Midianites rushed around in a panic, shouting as they ran.

[22] When the three hundred Israelites blew their horns, the Lord caused the warriors in the camp to fight against each other with their swords. Those who were not killed fled to places as far away as Beth-shittah near Zererah and to the border of Abel-meholah near Tabbath.

[23] Then Gideon sent for the warriors of Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh, who joined in the chase after the fleeing army of Midian. [24] Gideon also sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down to attack the Midianites. Cut them off at the shallows of the Jordan River at Beth-barah." And the men of Ephraim did as they were told. [25] They captured Oreb and Zeeb, the two Midianite generals, killing Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb. And they continued to chase the Midianites. Afterward the Israelites brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon, who was by the Jordan.

[8:1] Then the people of Ephraim asked Gideon, "Why have you treated us this way? Why didn't you send for us when you first went out to fight the Midianites?" And they argued heatedly with Gideon.

[2] But Gideon replied, "What have I done compared to you? Aren't the last grapes of Ephraim's harvest better than the entire crop of my little clan of Abiezer? [3] God gave you victory over Oreb and Zeeb, the generals of the Midianite army. What have I done compared to that?" When the men of Ephraim heard Gideon's answer, they were no longer angry.

[4] Gideon then crossed the Jordan River with his three hundred men, and though they were exhausted, they continued to chase the enemy. [5] When they reached Succoth, Gideon asked the leaders of the town, "Will you please give my warriors some food? They are very tired. I am chasing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."

[6] But the leaders of Succoth replied, "You haven't caught Zebah and Zalmunna yet. Catch them first, and then we will feed your warriors."

[7] So Gideon said, "After the Lord gives me victory over Zebah and Zalmunna, I will return and tear your flesh with the thorns and briars of the wilderness."

[8] From there Gideon went up to Peniel and asked for food, but he got the same answer. [9] So he said to the people of Peniel, "After I return in victory, I will tear down this tower."

[10] By this time Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with a remnant of 15,000 warriors—all that remained of the allied armies of the east—for 120,000 had already been killed. [11] Gideon circled around by the caravan route east of Nobah and Jogbehah, taking the Midianite army by surprise. [12] Zebah and Zalmunna, the two Midianite kings, fled, but Gideon chased them down and captured all their warriors.

[13] After this, Gideon returned by way of Heres Pass. [14] There he captured a young man from Succoth and demanded that he write down the names of all the seventy-seven rulers and leaders in the town. [15] Gideon then returned to Succoth and said to the leaders, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna. When we were here before, you taunted me, saying, 'You haven't caught Zebah and Zalmunna yet. Catch them first, and then we will feed your exhausted warriors.'" [16] Then Gideon took the leaders of the town and taught them a lesson, punishing them with thorns and briars from the wilderness. [17] He also knocked down the tower of Peniel and killed all the men in the town.

[18] Then Gideon asked Zebah and Zalmunna, "The men you killed at Tabor—what were they like?"

"Like you," they replied. "They all had the look of a king's son."

[19] "They were my brothers!" Gideon exclaimed. "As surely as the Lord lives, I wouldn't kill you if you hadn't killed them."

[20] Turning to Jether, his oldest son, he said, "Kill them!" But Jether did not draw his sword, for he was only a boy and was afraid.

[21] Then Zebah and Zalmunna said to Gideon, "Don't ask a boy to do a man's job! Do it yourself!" So Gideon killed them both and took the royal ornaments from the necks of their camels.

[22] Then the Israelites said to Gideon, "Be our ruler! You and your son and your grandson will be our rulers, for you have rescued us from Midian."

[23] But Gideon replied, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son. The Lord will rule over you! [24] However, I have one request. Each of you can give me an earring out of the treasures you collected from your fallen enemies." (The enemies, being Ishmaelites, all wore gold earrings.)

[25] "Gladly!" they replied. They spread out a cloak, and each one threw in a gold earring he had gathered. [26] The weight of the gold earrings was forty-three pounds, not including the crescents and pendants, the royal clothing of the kings, or the chains around the necks of their camels.

[27] Gideon made a sacred ephod from the gold and put it in Ophrah, his hometown. But soon all the Israelites prostituted themselves by worshiping it, and it became a trap for Gideon and his family.

[28] That is the story of how Israel subdued Midian, which never recovered. Throughout the rest of Gideon's lifetime—about forty years—the land was at peace.

[29] Then Gideon son of Joash returned home. [30] He had seventy sons, for he had many wives. [31] He also had a concubine in Shechem, who bore him a son named Abimelech. [32] Gideon died when he was very old, and he was buried in the grave of his father, Joash, at Ophrah in the land of the clan of Abiezer.

[33] As soon as Gideon was dead, the Israelites prostituted themselves by worshiping the images of Baal, making Baal-berith their god. [34] They forgot the Lord their God, who had rescued them from all their enemies surrounding them. [35] Nor did they show any loyalty to the family of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon), despite all the good he had done for Israel.

[9:1] One day Gideon's son Abimelech went to Shechem to visit his mother's brothers. He said to them and to the rest of his mother's family, [2] "Ask the people of Shechem whether they want to be ruled by all seventy of Gideon's sons or by one man. And remember, I am your own flesh and blood!"

[3] So Abimelech's uncles spoke to all the people of Shechem on his behalf. And after listening to their proposal, they decided in favor of Abimelech because he was their relative. [4] They gave him seventy silver coins from the temple of Baal-berith, which he used to hire some soldiers who agreed to follow him. [5] He took the soldiers to his father's home at Ophrah, and there, on one stone, they killed all seventy of his half-brothers. But the youngest brother, Jotham, escaped and hid. [6] Then the people of Shechem and Beth-millo called a meeting under the oak beside the pillar at Shechem and made Abimelech their king.

[7] When Jotham heard about this, he climbed to the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted, "Listen to me, people of Shechem! Listen to me if you want God to listen to you! [8] Once upon a time the trees decided to elect a king. First they said to the olive tree, 'Be our king!' [9] But it refused, saying, 'Should I quit producing the olive oil that blesses both God and people, just to wave back and forth over the trees?'"

[10] "Then they said to the fig tree, 'You be our king!' [11] But the fig tree also refused, saying, 'Should I quit producing my sweet fruit just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

[12] "Then they said to the grapevine, 'You be our king!' [13] But the grapevine replied, 'Should I quit producing the wine that cheers both God and people, just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

[14] "Then all the trees finally turned to the thornbush and said, 'Come, you be our king!' [15] And the thornbush replied, 'If you truly want to make me your king, come and take shelter in my shade. If not, let fire come out from me and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'

[16] "Now make sure you have acted honorably and in good faith by making Abimelech your king, and that you have done right by Gideon and all of his descendants. Have you treated my father with the honor he deserves? [17] For he fought for you and risked his life when he rescued you from the Midianites. [18] But now you have revolted against my father and his descendants, killing his seventy sons on one stone. And you have chosen his slave woman's son, Abimelech, to be your king just because he is your relative.

[19] If you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Gideon and his descendants, then may you find joy in Abimelech, and may he find joy in you. [20] But if you have not acted in good faith, then may fire come out from Abimelech and devour the people of Shechem and Beth-millo; and may fire come out from the people of Shechem and Beth-millo and devour Abimelech!" [21] Then Jotham escaped and lived in Beer because he was afraid of his brother Abimelech.

[22] After Abimelech had ruled over Israel for three years, [23] God stirred up trouble between Abimelech and the people of Shechem, and they revolted. [24] In the events that followed, God punished Abimelech and the men of Shechem for murdering Gideon's seventy sons. [25] The people of Shechem set an ambush for Abimelech on the hilltops and robbed everyone who passed that way. But someone warned Abimelech about their plot.

[26] At that time Gaal son of Ebed moved to Shechem with his brothers and gained the confidence of the people of Shechem. [27] During the annual harvest festival at Shechem, held in the temple of the local god, the wine flowed freely, and everyone began cursing Abimelech. [28] "Who is Abimelech?" Gaal shouted. "He's not a true descendant of Shechem! Why should we be Abimelech's servants? He's merely the son of Gideon, and Zebul is his administrator. Serve the men of Hamor, who are Shechem's true descendants. Why should we serve Abimelech?"

[29] If I were in charge, I would get rid of Abimelech. I would say to him, 'Get some more soldiers, and come out and fight!' "

[30] But when Zebul, the leader of the city, heard what Gaal was saying, he was furious. [31] He sent messengers to Abimelech in Arumah, telling him, "Gaal son of Ebed and his brothers have come to live in Shechem, and now they are inciting the city to rebel against you. [32] Come by night with an army and hide out in the fields.

[33] In the morning, as soon as it is daylight, storm the city. When Gaal and those who are with him come out against you, you can do with them as you wish."

[34] So Abimelech and his men went by night and split into four groups, stationing themselves around Shechem. [35] Gaal was standing at the city gates when Abimelech and his army came out of hiding. [36] When Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, "Look, there are people coming down from the hilltops!"

Zebul replied, "It's just the shadows of the hills that look like men."

[37] But again Gaal said, "No, people are coming down from the hills. And another group is coming down the road past the Diviners' Oak."

[38] Then Zebul turned on him triumphantly. "Now where is that big mouth of yours?" he demanded. "Wasn't it you that said, 'Who is Abimelech, and why should we be his servants?' The men you mocked are right outside the city! Go out and fight them!"

[39] Gaal then led the men of Shechem into battle against Abimelech, [40] but he was defeated and ran away. Many of Shechem's warriors were killed, and the ground was covered with dead bodies all the way to the city gate. [41] Abimelech stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his brothers out of Shechem.

[42] The next day the people of Shechem went out into the fields to battle. When Abimelech heard about it, [43] he divided his men into three groups and set an ambush in the fields. When Abimelech saw the people coming out of the city, he and his men jumped up from their hiding places and attacked them.

[44] Abimelech and his group stormed the city gate to keep the men of Shechem from getting back in, while Abimelech's other two groups cut them down in the fields. [45] The battle went on all day before Abimelech finally captured the city. He killed the people, leveled the city, and scattered salt all over the ground.

[46] When the people who lived in the tower of Shechem heard what had happened, they took refuge within the walls of the temple of Baal-berith.

[47] Someone reported to Abimelech that the people were gathered together in the temple, [48] so he led his forces to Mount Zalmon. He took an ax and chopped some branches from a tree, and he put them on his shoulder. "Quick, do as I have done!" he told his men. [49] So each of them cut down some branches, following Abimelech's example. They piled the branches against the walls of the temple and set them on fire. So all the people who had lived in the tower of Shechem died, about a thousand men and women.

[50] Then Abimelech attacked the city of Thebez and captured it. [51] But there was a strong tower inside the city, and the entire population fled to it. They barricaded themselves in and climbed up to the roof of the tower. [52] Abimelech followed them to attack the tower. But as he prepared to set fire to the entrance,

[53] A woman on the roof threw down a millstone that landed on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. [54] He said to his young armor bearer, "Draw your sword and kill me! Don't let it be said that a woman killed Abimelech!" So the young man stabbed him with his sword, and he died. [55] When Abimelech's men saw that he was dead, they disbanded and returned to their homes.

[56] Thus, God punished Abimelech for the evil he had done against his father by murdering his seventy brothers. [57] God also punished the men of Shechem for all their evil. So the curse of Jotham son of Gideon came true.

[10:1] After Abimelech's death, Tola, the son of Puah and descendant of Dodo, came to rescue Israel. He was from the tribe of Issachar but lived in the town of Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. [2] He was Israel's judge for twenty-three years. When he died, he was buried in Shamir.

[3] After Tola died, a man from Gilead named Jair judged Israel for twenty-two years. [4] His thirty sons rode around on thirty donkeys, and they owned thirty towns in the land of Gilead, which are still called the Towns of Jair. [5] When Jair died, he was buried in Kamon.

[6] Again the Israelites did evil in the Lord's sight. They worshiped images of Baal and Ashtoreth, and the gods of Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia. Not only this, but they abandoned the Lord and no longer served him at all. [7] So the Lord burned with anger against Israel, and he handed them over to the Philistines and the Ammonites, [8] who began to oppress them that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites east of the Jordan River in the land of the Amorites (that is, in Gilead).

[9] The Ammonites also crossed to the west side of the Jordan and attacked Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim. The Israelites were in great distress. [10] Finally, they cried out to the Lord, saying, "We have sinned against you because we have abandoned you as our God and have served the images of Baal."

[11] The Lord replied, "Did I not rescue you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, [12] the Sidonians, the Amalekites, and the Maonites? When they oppressed you, you cried out to me, and I rescued you. [13] Yet you have abandoned me and served other gods. So I will not rescue you anymore. [14] Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen! Let them rescue you in your hour of distress!"

[15] But the Israelites pleaded with the Lord and said, "We have sinned. Punish us as you see fit, only rescue us today from our enemies." [16] Then the Israelites put aside their foreign gods and served the Lord. And he was grieved by their misery.

[17] At that time the armies of Ammon had gathered for war and were camped in Gilead, preparing to attack Israel's army at Mizpah. [18] The leaders of Gilead said to each other, "Whoever attacks the Ammonites first will become ruler over all the people of Gilead."

[11:1] Now Jephthah of Gilead was a great warrior. He was the son of Gilead, but his mother was a prostitute. [2] Gilead's wife also had several sons, and when these half-brothers grew up, they chased Jephthah off the land. "You will not get any of our father's inheritance," they said, "for you are the son of a prostitute." [3] So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Soon he had a large band of rebels following him.

[4] At about this time, the Ammonites began their war against Israel. [5] When the Ammonites attacked, the leaders of Gilead sent for Jephthah in the land of Tob. They said, [6] "Come and be our commander! Help us fight the Ammonites!"

[7] But Jephthah said to them, "Aren't you the ones who hated me and drove me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now when you're in trouble?"

[8] "Because we need you," they replied. "If you will lead us in battle against the Ammonites, we will make you ruler over all the people of Gilead."

[9] Jephthah said, "If I come with you and if the Lord gives me victory over the Ammonites, will you really make me ruler over all the people?"

[10] "The Lord is our witness," the leaders replied. "We promise to do whatever you say."

[11] So Jephthah went with the leaders of Gilead, and he became their ruler and commander of the army. At Mizpah, in the presence of the Lord, Jephthah repeated what he had said to the leaders.

[12] Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of Ammon, demanding to know why Israel was being attacked. [13] The king of Ammon answered Jephthah's messengers, "When the Israelites came out of Egypt, and they stole my land from the Arnon River to the Jabbok River and all the way to the Jordan. Now then, give back the land peaceably."

[14] Jephthah sent this message back to the Ammonite king:

[15] "This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not steal any land from Moab or Ammon. [16] When the people of Israel arrived at Kadesh on their journey from Egypt after crossing the Red Sea, [17] they sent messengers to the king of Edom asking for permission to pass through his land. But their request was denied. Then they asked the king of Moab for similar permission, but he wouldn't let them pass through either. So the people of Israel stayed in Kadesh.

[18] "Finally, they went around Edom and Moab through the wilderness. They traveled along Moab's eastern border and camped on the other side of the Arnon River. But they never once crossed the Arnon River into Moab.

[19] "Then Israel sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites, who ruled from Heshbon, asking for permission to cross through his land to get to their destination. [20] But King Sihon didn't trust Israel to pass through his land. Instead, he mobilized his army at Jahaz and attacked them. [21] But the Lord, the God of Israel, gave his people victory over King Sihon. So Israel took control of all the land of the Amorites, who lived in that region, [22] from the Arnon River to the Jabbok River, and from the wilderness to the Jordan.

[23] "So you see, it was the Lord, the God of Israel, who took away the land from the Amorites and gave it to Israel. Why, then, should we give it to you? [24] You keep whatever your god Chemosh gives you, and we will keep whatever the Lord our God gives us. [25] Are you any better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he try to make a case against Israel for disputed land? Did he go to war? No, of course not. [26] But now after three hundred years you make an issue of this! Israel has been living here all this time, spread across the land from Heshbon to Aroer and in all the towns along the Arnon River.

Why have you made no effort to recover it before now? [27] I have not sinned against you. Rather, you have wronged me by attacking me. Let the Lord, who is judge, decide today which of us is right—Israel or Ammon."

[28] But the king of Ammon paid no attention to Jephthah's message.

[29] At that time the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he went throughout the land of Gilead and Manasseh, including Mizpah in Gilead, and led an army against the Ammonites. [30] And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. He said, "If you give me victory over the Ammonites, [31] I will give to the Lord the first thing coming out of my house to greet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

[32] So Jephthah led his army against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave him victory. [33] He thoroughly defeated the Ammonites from Aroer to an area near Minnith—twenty towns—and as far away as Abel-keramim. Thus Israel subdued the Ammonites.

[34] When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, his daughter—his only child—ran out to meet him, playing on a tambourine and dancing for joy. [35] When he saw her, he tore his clothes in anguish. "My daughter!" he cried out. "My heart is breaking! What a tragedy that you came out to greet me. For I have made a vow to the Lord and cannot take it back."

[36] And she said, "Father, you have made a promise to the Lord. You must do to me what you have promised, for the Lord has given you a great victory over your enemies, the Ammonites. [37] But first let me go up and roam in the hills and weep with my friends for two months, because I will die a virgin."

[38] "You may go," Jephthah said. And he let her go away for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never have children. [39] When she returned home, her father kept his vow, and she died a virgin. So it has become a custom in Israel [40] for young Israelite women to go away for four days each year to lament the fate of Jephthah's daughter.

[12:1] Then the tribe of Ephraim mobilized its army and crossed over to Zaphon. They sent this message to Jephthah: "Why didn't you call for us to help you fight against Ammon? We are going to burn down your house with you in it!"

[2] "I summoned you at the beginning of the dispute, but you refused to come!" Jephthah said. "You failed to help us in our struggle against Ammon.

[3] So I risked my life and went to battle without you, and the Lord gave me victory over the Ammonites. So why have you come to fight me?"

[4] The leaders of Ephraim responded, "The men of Gilead are nothing more than rejects from Ephraim and Manasseh." So Jephthah called out his army and attacked the men of Ephraim and defeated them.

[5] Jephthah captured the shallows of the Jordan, and whenever a fugitive from Ephraim tried to go back across, the men of Gilead would challenge him. "Are you a member of the tribe of Ephraim?" they would ask. If the man said, "No, I'm not," [6] they would tell him to say "Shibboleth." If he was from Ephraim, he would say "Sibboleth," because people from Ephraim cannot pronounce the word correctly. Then they would take him and kill him at the shallows of the Jordan River. So forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

[7] Jephthah was Israel's judge for six years. When he died, he was buried in one of the towns of Gilead.

[8] After Jephthah, Ibzan became Israel's judge. He lived in Bethlehem, [9] and he had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He married his daughters to men outside his clan and brought in thirty young women from outside his clan to marry his sons. Ibzan judged Israel for seven years. [10] When he died, he was buried at Bethlehem.

[11] After him, Elon from Zebulun became Israel's judge. He judged Israel for ten years. [12] When he died, he was buried at Aijalon in Zebulun.

[13] After Elon died, Abdon son of Hillel, from Pirathon, became Israel's judge. [14] He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys. He was Israel's judge for eight years. [15] Then he died and was buried at Pirathon in Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

[13:1] Again the Israelites did what was evil in the Lord's sight, so the Lord handed them over to the Philistines, who kept them in subjection for forty years.

[2] In those days, a man named Manoah from the tribe of Dan lived in the town of Zorah. His wife was unable to become pregnant, and they had no children.

[3] The angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife and said, "Even though you have been unable to have children, you will soon become pregnant and give birth to a son. [4] You must not drink wine or any other alcoholic drink or eat any forbidden food.

[5] You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and his hair must never be cut. For he will be dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth. He will rescue Israel from the Philistines."

[6] The woman ran and told her husband, "A man of God appeared to me! He was like one of God's angels, terrifying to look at. I didn't ask where he was from, and he didn't tell me his name. [7] But he told me, 'You will become pregnant and give birth to a son. You must not drink wine or any other alcoholic drink or eat any forbidden food. For your son will be dedicated to God as a Nazirite from the moment of his birth until the day of his death.' "

[8] Then Manoah prayed to the Lord. He said, "Lord, please let the man of God come back to us again and give us more instructions about this son who is to be born."

[9] God answered his prayer, and the angel of God appeared once again to his wife as she was sitting in the field. But her husband, Manoah, was not with her. [10] So she quickly ran and told her husband, "The man who appeared to me the other day is here again!"

[11] Manoah ran back with his wife and asked, "Are you the man who talked to my wife the other day?"

"Yes," he replied, "I am."

[12] So Manoah asked him, "When your words come true, what kind of rules should govern the boy's life and work?"

[13] The angel of the Lord replied, "Be sure your wife follows the instructions I gave her. [14] She must not eat grapes or raisins, drink wine or any other alcoholic drink, or eat any forbidden food."

[15] Then Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "Please stay here until we can prepare a young goat for you to eat."

[16] "I will stay," the angel of the Lord replied, "but I will not eat anything. However, you may prepare a burnt offering as a sacrifice to the Lord." (Manoah didn't realize it was the angel of the Lord.)

[17] Then Manoah asked the angel of the Lord, "What is your name? For when all this comes true, we want to honor you."

[18] "Why do you ask my name?" the angel of the Lord replied. "You wouldn't understand if I told you."

[19] Then Manoah took a young goat and a grain offering and offered it on a rock as a sacrifice to the Lord. And as Manoah and his wife watched, the Lord did an amazing thing. [20] As the flames from the altar shot up toward the sky, the angel of the Lord ascended in the fire. When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell with their faces to the ground.

[21] The angel did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Manoah finally realized it was the angel of the Lord, [22] and he said to his wife, "We will die, for we have seen God!"

[23] But his wife said, "If the Lord were going to kill us, he wouldn't have accepted our burnt offering and grain offering. He wouldn't have appeared to us and told us this wonderful thing and done these miracles."

[24] When her son was born, they named him Samson. And the Lord blessed him as he grew up. [25] And in Mahaneh-dan, which is located between the towns of Zorah and Eshtaol, the Spirit of the Lord began to take hold of him.

[14:1] One day when Samson was in Timnah, he noticed a certain Philistine woman. [2] When he returned home, he told his father and mother, "I want to marry a young Philistine woman I saw in Timnah."

[3] His father and mother objected strenuously, "Isn't there one woman in our tribe or among all the Israelites you could marry? Why must you go to the pagan Philistines to find a wife?"

But Samson told his father, "Get her for me. She is the one I want." [4] His father and mother didn't realize the Lord was at work in this, creating an opportunity to disrupt the Philistines, who ruled over Israel at that time.

[5] As Samson and his parents were going down to Timnah, a young lion attacked Samson near the vineyards of Timnah. [6] At that moment the Spirit of the Lord powerfully took control of him, and he ripped the lion's jaws apart with his bare hands. He did it as easily as if it were a young goat. But he didn't tell his father or mother about it. [7] When Samson arrived in Timnah, he talked with the woman and was very pleased with her.

[8] Later, when he returned to Timnah for the wedding, he turned off the path to look at the carcass of the lion. And he found that a swarm of bees had made some honey in the carcass. [9] He scooped some of the honey into his hands and ate it along the way. He also gave some to his father and mother, and they ate it. But he didn't tell them he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion.

[10] As his father was making final arrangements for the marriage, Samson threw a party at Timnah, as was the custom of the day. [11] Thirty young men from the town were invited to be his companions. [12] Samson said to them, "Let me tell you a riddle. If you solve my riddle during these seven days of the celebration, I will give you thirty plain linen robes and thirty fancy robes. [13] But if you can't solve it, then you must give me thirty linen robes and thirty fancy robes."

"All right," they agreed, "let's hear your riddle."

[14] So he said:

"From the one who eats came something to eat;
out of the strong came something sweet."

Three days later they were still trying to figure it out. [15] On the fourth day they said to Samson's wife, "Get the answer to the riddle from your husband, or we will burn down your father's house with you in it. Did you invite us to this party just to make us poor?"

[16] So Samson's wife came to him in tears and said, "You don't love me; you hate me! You have given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer."

"I haven't even given the answer to my father or mother," he replied. "Why should I tell you?" [17] So she cried whenever she was with him and kept it up for the rest of the celebration. At last, on the seventh day, he told her the answer because of her persistent nagging. Then she gave the answer to the young men.

[18] So before sunset of the seventh day, the men of the town came to Samson with their answer:

"What is sweeter than honey?

What is stronger than a lion?"

Samson replied, "If you hadn't plowed with my heifer, you wouldn't have found the answer to my riddle!" [19] Then the Spirit of the Lord powerfully took control of him. He went down to the town of Ashkelon, killed thirty men, took their belongings, and gave their clothing to the men who had answered his riddle. But Samson was furious about what had happened, and he went back home to live with his father and mother. [20] So his wife was given in marriage to the man who had been Samson's best man at the wedding.

[15:1] Later on, during the wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat as a present to his wife. He intended to sleep with her, but her father wouldn't let him in. [2] "I really thought you hated her," her father explained, "so I gave her in marriage to your best man. But look, her sister is more beautiful than she is. Marry her instead."

[3] Samson said, "This time I cannot be blamed for everything I am going to do to you Philistines." [4] Then he went out and caught three hundred foxes. He tied their tails together in pairs, and he fastened a torch to each pair of tails. [5] Then he lit the torches and let the foxes run through the fields of the Philistines. He burned all their grain to the ground, including the grain still in piles and all that had been bundled. He also destroyed their grapevines and olive trees.

[6] "Who did this?" the Philistines demanded.

"Samson," was the reply, "because his father-in-law from Timnah gave Samson's wife to be married to his best man." So the Philistines went and got the woman and her father and burned them to death.

[7] "Because you did this," Samson vowed, "I will take my revenge on you, and I won't stop until I'm satisfied!" [8] So he attacked the Philistines with great fury and killed many of them. Then he went to live in a cave in the rock of Etam.

[9] The Philistines retaliated by setting up camp in Judah and raiding the town of Lehi. [10] The men of Judah asked the Philistines, "Why have you attacked us?"

The Philistines replied, "We've come to capture Samson. We have come to pay him back for what he did to us."

[11] So three thousand men of Judah went down to get Samson at the cave in the rock of Etam. They said to Samson, "Don't you realize the Philistines rule over us? What are you doing to us?"

But Samson replied, "I only paid them back for what they did to me."

[12] But the men of Judah told him, "We have come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines."

"All right," Samson said. "But promise that you won't kill me yourselves."

[13] "We will tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines," they replied. "We won't kill you." So they tied him up with two new ropes and led him away from the rock.

[14] As Samson arrived at Lehi, the Philistines came shouting in triumph. But the Spirit of the Lord powerfully took control of Samson, and he snapped the ropes on his arms as if they were burnt strands of flax, and they fell from his wrists. [15] Then he picked up a donkey's jawbone that was lying on the ground and killed a thousand Philistines with it. [16] And Samson said,

"With the jawbone of a donkey,
I've made heaps on heaps!
With the jawbone of a donkey,
I've killed a thousand men!"

[17] When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was named Jawbone Hill.

[18] Now Samson was very thirsty, and he cried out to the Lord, "You have accomplished this great victory by the strength of your servant. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of these pagan people?" [19] So God caused water to gush out of a hollow in the ground at Lehi, and Samson was revived as he drank. Then he named that place "The Spring of the One Who Cried Out," and it is still in Lehi to this day.

[20] Samson was Israel's judge for twenty years, while the Philistines ruled the land.

[16:1] One day Samson went to the Philistine city of Gaza and spent the night with a prostitute. [2] Word soon spread that Samson was there, so the men of Gaza gathered together and waited all night at the city gates. They kept quiet during the night, saying to themselves, "When the light of morning comes, we will kill him."

[3] But Samson stayed in bed only until midnight. Then he got up, took hold of the city gates with its two posts, and lifted them, bar and all, right out of the ground. He put them on his shoulders and carried them all the way to the top of the hill across from Hebron.

[4] Later Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the valley of Sorek. [5] The leaders of the Philistines went to her and said, "Find out from Samson what makes him so strong and how he can be overpowered and tied up securely. Then each of us will give you eleven hundred pieces of silver."

[6] So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me what makes you so strong and what it would take to tie you up securely."

[7] Samson replied, "If I am tied up with seven new bowstrings that have not yet been dried, I will be as weak as anyone else."

[8] So the Philistine leaders brought Delilah seven new bowstrings, and she tied Samson up with them. [9] She had hidden some men in one of the rooms of her house, and she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But Samson snapped the bowstrings as if they were string that had been burned in a fire. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

[10] Afterward Delilah said to him, "You made fun of me and told me a lie! Now please tell me how you can be tied up securely."

[11] Samson replied, "If I am tied up with brand-new ropes that have never been used, I will be as weak as anyone else."

[12] So Delilah took new ropes and tied him up with them. The men were hiding in the room as before, and again Delilah cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But Samson snapped the ropes from his arms as if they were thread.

[13] Then Delilah said, "You have been making fun of me and telling me lies! Won't you please tell me how you can be tied up securely?"

Samson replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my hair into the fabric on your loom and tighten it with the loom shuttle, I will be as weak as anyone else."

So while he slept, Delilah wove the seven braids of his hair into the fabric [14] and tightened it with the loom shuttle. Again she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But Samson woke up, pulled back the loom shuttle, and yanked his hair away from the loom and the fabric.

[15] Then Delilah pouted, "How can you say you love me when you don't confide in me? You've made fun of me three times now, and you still haven't told me what makes you so strong!" [16] So day after day she nagged him until he couldn't stand it any longer.

[17] Finally, Samson told her his secret. "My hair has never been cut," he confessed, "for I was dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as anyone else."

[18] Delilah realized he had finally told her the truth, so she sent for the Philistine leaders. "Come back one more time," she said, "for he has told me everything." So the Philistine leaders returned and brought the money with them.

[19] Delilah lulled Samson to sleep with his head in her lap, and she called in a man to shave off his hair, making his capture certain. And his strength left him.

[20] Then she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!"

When he woke up, he thought, "I will do as before and shake myself free." But he didn't realize the Lord had left him.

[21] So the Philistines captured him and gouged out his eyes. They took him to Gaza, where he was bound with bronze chains and made to grind grain in the prison. [22] But before long his hair began to grow back.

[23] The Philistine leaders held a great festival, offering sacrifices and praising their god, Dagon. They said, "Our god has given us victory over our enemy Samson!"

[24] When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy to us! The one who killed so many of us is now in our power!"

[25] Half-drunk by now, the people demanded, "Bring out Samson so he can perform for us!" So he was brought from the prison and made to stand at the center of the temple, between the two pillars supporting the roof.

[26] Samson said to the servant who was leading him by the hand, "Place my hands against the two pillars. I want to rest against them." [27] The temple was completely filled with people. All the Philistine leaders were there, and there were about three thousand on the roof who were watching Samson and making fun of him.

[28] Then Samson prayed to the Lord, "Sovereign Lord, remember me again. O God, please strengthen me one more time so that I may pay back the Philistines for the loss of my eyes." [29] Then Samson put his hands on the center pillars of the temple and pushed against them with all his might. [30] "Let me die with the Philistines," he prayed. And the temple crashed down on the Philistine leaders and all the people. So he killed more people when he died than he had during his entire lifetime.

[31] Later his brothers and other relatives went down to get his body. They took him back home and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol, where his father, Manoah, was buried. Samson had been Israel's judge for twenty years.

C. THE MORAL FAILURE OF ISRAEL (Judges 17:1-21:25)

Despite the efforts of Israel's judges, the people still would not turn wholeheartedly to God. They all did whatever they thought was best for themselves. The result was the spiritual, moral, and political decline of the nation. Our lives will also fall into decline and decay unless we live by the guidelines God has given us.

1. Idolatry in the tribe of Dan
2. War against the tribe of Benjamin

Judges 17:1-21:25

A man named Micah lived in the hill country of Ephraim. [2] One day he said to his mother, "I heard you curse the thief who stole eleven hundred pieces of silver from you. Well, here they are. I was the one who took them."

"The Lord bless you for admitting it," his mother replied. [3] He returned the money to her, and she said, "I now dedicate these silver coins to the Lord. In honor of my son, I will have an image carved and an idol cast." [4] So his mother took two hundred of the silver coins to a silversmith, who made them into an image and an idol. And these were placed in Micah's house.

[5] Micah set up a shrine, and he made a sacred ephod and some household idols. Then he installed one of his sons as the priest. [6] In those days Israel had no king, so the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.

[7] One day a young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah [8] arrived in that area of Ephraim, looking for a good place to live. He happened to stop at Micah's house as he was traveling through. [9] "Where are you from?" Micah asked him.

And he replied, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am looking for a place to live."

[10] "Stay here with me," Micah said, "and you can be a father and priest to me. I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, plus a change of clothes and your food."

[11] The Levite agreed to this and became like one of Micah's sons. [12] So Micah ordained the Levite as his personal priest, and he lived in Micah's house.

[13] "I know the Lord will bless me now," Micah said, "because I have a Levite serving as my priest."

[18:1] Now in those days Israel had no king. And the tribe of Dan was trying to find a place to settle, for they had not yet driven out the people who lived in the land assigned to them. [2] So the men of Dan chose five warriors from among their clans, who lived in the towns of Zorah and Eshtaol, to scout out a land for them to settle in.

When these warriors arrived in the hill country of Ephraim, they came to Micah's home and spent the night there. [3] Noticing the young Levite's accent, they took him aside and asked him, "Who brought you here, and what are you doing? Why are you here?" [4] He told them about his agreement with Micah and that he was Micah's personal priest.

[5] Then they said, "Ask God whether or not our journey will be successful."

[6] "Go in peace," the priest replied. "For the Lord will go ahead of you on your journey."

[7] So the five men went on to the town of Laish, where they noticed the people living carefree lives, like the Sidonians; they were peaceful and secure. The people were also wealthy because their land was very fertile. And they lived a great distance from Sidon and had no allies nearby.

[8] When the men returned to Zorah and Eshtaol, their relatives asked them, "What did you find?"

[9] The men replied, "Let's attack! We have seen the land, and it is very good. You should not hesitate to go and take possession of it. [10] When you get there, you will find the people living carefree lives. God has given us a spacious and fertile land, lacking in nothing!"

[11] So six hundred warriors from the tribe of Dan set out from Zorah and Eshtaol. [12] They camped at a place west of Kiriath-jearim in Judah, which is called Mahaneh-dan to this day. [13] Then they went up into the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah.

[14] The five men who had scouted out the land around Laish said to the others, "There is a shrine here with a sacred ephod, some household idols, a carved image, and a cast idol. It's obvious what we ought to do." [15] So the five men went over to Micah's house, where the young Levite lived, and greeted him kindly.

[16] As the six hundred warriors from the tribe of Dan stood just outside the gate, [17] the five spies entered the shrine and took the carved image, the sacred ephod, the household idols, and the cast idol.

[18] When the priest saw the men carrying all the sacred objects out of Micah's shrine, he said, "What are you doing?"

[19] "Be quiet and come with us," they said. "Be a father and priest to all of us. Isn't it better to be a priest for an entire tribe of Israel than just for the household of one man?" [20] The young priest was quite happy to go with them, so he took along the sacred ephod, the household idols, and the carved image. [21] They started on their way again, placing their children, livestock, and possessions in front of them.

[22] When the people from the tribe of Dan were quite a distance from Micah's home, Micah and some of his neighbors came chasing after them. [23] They were shouting as they caught up with them. The men of Dan turned around and said, "What do you want? Why have you called these men together and chased after us like this?"

[24] "What do you mean, what do I want?" Micah replied. "You've taken away all my gods and my priest, and I have nothing left!"

[25] The men of Dan said, "Watch what you say! Some of us are short-tempered, and they might get angry and kill you and your family." [26] So the men of Dan went on their way. When Micah saw that there were too many of them for him to attack, he turned around and went home.

[27] Then, with Micah's idols and his priest, the men of Dan came to the town of Laish, whose people were peaceful and secure. They attacked and killed all the people and burned the town to the ground. [28] There was no one to rescue the residents of the town, for they lived a great distance from Sidon and had no allies nearby. This happened in the valley near Beth-rehob.

Then the people of the tribe of Dan rebuilt the town and lived there. [29] They renamed the town Dan after their ancestor, Israel's son, but it had originally been called Laish.

[30] Then they set up the carved image, and they appointed Jonathan son of Gershom, a descendant of Moses, as their priest. This family continued as priests for the tribe of Dan until the Exile. [31] So Micah's carved image was worshiped by the tribe of Dan as long as the Tabernacle of God remained at Shiloh.

[19:1] Now in those days Israel had no king. There was a man from the tribe of Levi living in a remote area of the hill country of Ephraim. One day he brought home a woman from Bethlehem in Judah to be his concubine. [2] But she was unfaithful to him and returned to her father's home in Bethlehem. After about four months, [3] her husband took a servant and an extra donkey to Bethlehem to persuade her to come back. When he arrived at her father's house, she took him inside, and her father welcomed him. [4] Her father urged him to stay awhile, so he stayed three days, eating, drinking, and sleeping there.

[5] On the fourth day the man was up early, ready to leave, but the woman's father said, "Have something to eat before you go." [6] So the two of them sat down together and had something to eat and drink. Then the woman's father said, "Please stay the night and enjoy yourself." [7] The man got up to leave, but his father-in-law kept urging him to stay, so he finally gave in and stayed the night. [8] On the morning of the fifth day he was up early again, ready to leave, and again the woman's father said, "Have something to eat; then you can leave some time this afternoon." So they had another day of feasting.

[9] That afternoon, as he and his concubine and servant were preparing to leave, his father-in-law said, "Look, it's getting late. Stay the night and enjoy yourself. Tomorrow you can get up early and be on your way."

[10] But this time the man was determined to leave. So he took his two saddled donkeys and his concubine and headed in the direction of Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). [11] It was late in the day when they reached Jebus, and the man's servant said to him, "It's getting too late to travel; let's stay in this Jebusite city tonight."

[12] "No," his master said, "we can't stay in this foreign city where there are no Israelites. We will go on to Gibeah. [13] We will find a place to spend the night in either Gibeah or Ramah." [14] So they went on. The sun was setting as they came to Gibeah, a town in the land of Benjamin, [15] so they stopped there to spend the night. They rested in the town square, but no one took them in for the night.

[16] That evening an old man came home from his work in the fields. He was from the hill country of Ephraim, but he was living in Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin. [17] When he saw the travelers sitting in the town square, he asked them where they were from and where they were going.

[18] "We have been in Bethlehem in Judah," the man replied. "We are on our way home to a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim, and we're going to the Tabernacle of the Lord. But no one has taken us in for the night, [19] even though we have everything we need. We have straw and fodder for our donkeys and plenty of bread and wine for ourselves."

[20] "You are welcome to stay with me," the old man said. "I will give you anything you might need. But whatever you do, don't spend the night in the square." [21] So he took them home with him and fed their donkeys. After they washed their feet, they had supper together.

[22] While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men in the town surrounded the house. They began beating at the door and shouting to the old man, "Bring out the man who is staying with you so we can have sex with him."

[23] The old man stepped outside to talk to them. "No, my brothers, don't do such an evil thing. For this man is my guest, and such a thing would be shameful. [24] Here, take my virgin daughter and this man's concubine. I will bring them out to you, and you can do whatever you like to them. But don't do such a shameful thing to this man."

[25] But they wouldn't listen to him. Then the Levite took his concubine and pushed her out the door. The men of the town abused her all night, taking turns raping her until morning. Finally, at dawn, they let her go. [26] At daybreak the woman returned to the house where her husband was staying. She collapsed at the door of the house and lay there until it was light.

[27] When her husband opened the door to leave, he found her there. She was lying face down, with her hands on the threshold. [28] He said, "Get up! Let's go!" But there was no answer. So he put her body on his donkey and took her home.

[29] When he got home, he took a knife and cut his concubine's body into twelve pieces. Then he sent one piece to each tribe of Israel. [30] Everyone who saw it said, "Such a horrible crime has not been committed since Israel left Egypt. Shouldn't we speak up and do something about this?"

[20:1] Then all the Israelites, from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead, came together in one large assembly and stood in the presence of the Lord at Mizpah. [2] The leaders of all the people and all the tribes of Israel—400,000 warriors armed with swords—took their positions in the assembly of the people of God. [3] (Word soon reached the land of Benjamin that the other tribes had gone up to Mizpah.) The Israelites then asked how this terrible crime had happened.

[4] The Levite, the husband of the woman who had been murdered, said, "My concubine and I came to Gibeah, a town in the land of Benjamin, to spend the night. [5] That night some of the leaders of Gibeah surrounded the house, planning to kill me, and they raped my concubine until she was dead. [6] So I cut her body into twelve pieces and sent the pieces throughout the land of Israel, for these men have committed this terrible and shameful crime. [7] Now then, the entire community of Israel must decide what should be done about this!"

[8] And all the people stood up together and replied, "Not one of us will return home. [9] Instead, we will draw lots to decide who will attack Gibeah. [10] One tenth of the men from each tribe will be chosen to supply the warriors with food, and the rest of us will take revenge on Gibeah for this shameful thing they have done in Israel." [11] So all the Israelites were united, and they gathered together to attack the town.

[12] The Israelites sent messengers to the tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What a terrible thing has been done among you! [13] Give up these evil men from Gibeah so we can execute them and purge Israel of this evil."

But the people of Benjamin would not listen. [14] Instead, they came from their towns and gathered at Gibeah to fight the Israelites. [15] Twenty-six thousands of their warriors armed with swords arrived in Gibeah to join the seven hundred warriors who lived there. [16] Seven hundreds of Benjamin's warriors were left-handed, each of whom could sling a rock and hit a target within a hairsbreadth, without missing. [17] Israel had 400,000 warriors armed with swords, not counting Benjamin's warriors.

[18] Before the battle the Israelites went to Bethel and asked God, "Which tribe should lead the attack against the people of Benjamin?"

The Lord answered, "Judah is to go first."

[19] So the Israelites left early the next morning and camped near Gibeah. [20] Then they advanced toward Gibeah to attack the men of Benjamin. [21] But Benjamin's warriors, who were defending the town, came out and killed twenty-two thousand Israelites in the field that day.

[22] But the Israelites took courage and assembled at the same place they had fought the previous day. [23] (For they had gone up to Bethel and wept in the presence of the Lord until evening. Then they asked the Lord, "Should we fight against our relatives from Benjamin again?" And the Lord said, "Go out and fight against them.")

[24] So they went out to fight against the warriors of Benjamin, [25] but the men of Benjamin killed another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of whom were experienced with a sword.

[26] Then all the Israelites went up to Bethel and wept in the presence of the Lord and fasted until evening. They also brought burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord. [27] And the Israelites went up seeking direction from the Lord. (In those days the Ark of the Covenant of God was in Bethel, [28] and Phinehas son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron was the priest.) The Israelites asked the Lord, "Should we fight against our relatives from Benjamin again or should we stop?"

The Lord said, "Go! Tomorrow I will give you victory over them."

[29] So the Israelites set an ambush all around Gibeah. [30] They went out on the third day and assembled at the same place as before. [31] When the warriors of Benjamin came out to attack, they were drawn away from the town. And as they had done before, they began to kill the Israelites. About thirty Israelites died in the open fields and along the roads leading to Bethel and Gibeah.

[32] Then the warriors of Benjamin shouted, "We're defeating them as we did in the first battle!" But the Israelites had agreed in advance to run away so that the men of Benjamin would chase them along the roads and be drawn away from the town.

[33] When the main group of Israelite warriors reached Baal-tamar, they turned and prepared to attack. Then the Israelites hiding in ambush west of Gibeah jumped up from where they were [34] and advanced against Benjamin from behind. The fighting was so heavy that Benjamin didn't realize the impending disaster. [35] So the Lord helped Israel defeat Benjamin, and that day the Israelites killed 25,100 of Benjamin's warriors, all of whom were experienced with a sword. [36] Then the men of Benjamin saw that they were beaten.

The Israelites had retreated from Benjamin's warriors in order to give those hiding in ambush more room to maneuver. [37] Then those who were in hiding rushed in from all sides and killed everyone in the town. [38] They sent up a large cloud of smoke from the town, [39] which was the signal for the Israelites to turn and attack Benjamin's warriors.

By that time Benjamin's warriors had killed about thirty Israelites, and they shouted, "We're defeating them as we did in the first battle!" [40] But when the warriors of Benjamin looked behind them and saw the smoke rising into the sky from every part of the town, [41] the Israelites turned and attacked. At this point Benjamin's warriors realized disaster was near and became terrified.

[42] So they ran toward the wilderness, but the Israelites chased after them and killed them. [43] The Israelites surrounded the men of Benjamin and were relentless in chasing them down, finally overtaking them east of Gibeah. [44] Eighteen thousands of Benjamin's greatest warriors died in that day's battle. [45] The survivors fled into the wilderness toward the rock of Rimmon, but Israel killed five thousand of them along the road. They continued the chase until they had killed another two thousand near Gidom.

[46] So the tribe of Benjamin lost twenty-five thousand brave warriors that day, [47] leaving only six hundred men who escaped to the rock of Rimmon, where they lived for four months. [48] Then the Israelites returned and slaughtered every living thing in all the towns—the people, the cattle—everything. They also burned down every town they came to.

[21:1] The Israelites had vowed at Mizpah never to give their daughters in marriage to a man from the tribe of Benjamin. [2] And the people went to Bethel and sat in the presence of God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly. [3] "O Lord, God of Israel," they cried out, "why has this happened? Now one of our tribes is missing!"

[4] Early the next morning the people built an altar and presented their burnt offerings and peace offerings on it. [5] Then they said, "Was any tribe of Israel not represented when we held our council in the presence of the Lord at Mizpah?" At that time they had taken a solemn oath in the Lord's presence, vowing that anyone who refused to come must die.

[6] The Israelites felt deep sadness for Benjamin and said, "Today we have lost one of the tribes from our family; it is nearly wiped out. [7] How can we find wives for the few who remain, since we have sworn by the Lord not to give them our daughters in marriage?"

[8] So they asked, "Was anyone absent when we presented ourselves to the Lord at Mizpah?" And they discovered that no one from Jabesh-gilead had attended. [9] For after they counted all the people, no one from Jabesh-gilead was present. [10] So they sent twelve thousand warriors to Jabesh-gilead with orders to kill everyone there, including women and children. [11] "This is what you are to do," they said. "Completely destroy all the males and every woman who is not a virgin." [12] Among the residents of Jabesh-gilead they found four hundred young virgins who had never slept with a man, and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh in the land of Canaan.

[13] The Israelite assembly sent a peace delegation to the little remnant of Benjamin who were living at the rock of Rimmon. [14] Then the men of Benjamin returned to their homes, and the four hundred women of Jabesh-gilead who were spared were given to them as wives. But there were not enough women for all of them.

[15] The people felt sorry for Benjamin because the Lord had left this gap in the tribes of Israel. [16] So the Israelite leaders asked, "How can we find wives for the few who remain, since all the women of the tribe of Benjamin are dead? [17] There must be heirs for the survivors so that an entire tribe of Israel will not be lost forever. [18] But we cannot give them our own daughters in marriage because we have sworn with a solemn oath that anyone who does this will fall under God's curse."

[19] Then they thought of the annual festival of the Lord held in Shiloh, between Lebonah and Bethel, along the east side of the road that goes from Bethel to Shechem. [20] They told the men of Benjamin who still needed wives, "Go and hide in the vineyards. [21] When the women of Shiloh come out for their dances, rush out from the vineyards, and each of you can take one of them home to be your wife! [22] And when their fathers and brothers come to us in protest, we will tell them, 'Please be understanding. Let them have your daughters, for we didn't find enough wives for them when we destroyed Jabesh-gilead. And you are not guilty of breaking the vow since you did not give your daughters in marriage to them.' "

[23] So the men of Benjamin did as they were told. They kidnapped the women who took part in the celebration and carried them off to the land of their own inheritance. Then they rebuilt their towns and lived in them. [24] So the assembly of Israel departed by tribes and families, and they returned to their own homes.

[25] In those days Israel had no king, so the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.

MEGATHEMES

THEME: Decline COMPROMISE

EXPLANATION:

Whenever a judge died, the people faced decline and failure because they compromised their high spiritual purpose in many ways. They abandoned their mission to drive all the people out of the land, and they adopted the customs of the people living around them.

IMPORTANCE:

Society has many rewards to offer those who compromise their faith: wealth, acceptance, recognition, power, and influence. When God gives us a mission, it must not be polluted by a desire for approval from society. We must keep our eyes on Christ who is our Judge and Deliverer.

THEME: Decay/Apostasy

EXPLANATION:

Israel's moral downfall had its roots in the fierce independence that each tribe cherished. It led to everyone doing whatever seemed good in his own eyes. There was no unity in government or in worship. Law and order broke down. Finally idol worship and man-made religion led to the complete abandoning of faith in God.

IMPORTANCE: We can expect decay when we value anything more highly than God. If we value our own independence more than dedication to God, we have placed an idol in our hearts. Soon our lives become temples to that god. We must constantly regard God's first claim on our lives and all our desires.

THEME: Defeat/Oppression

EXPLANATION:

God used evil oppressors to punish the Israelites for their sin, to bring them to the point of repentance, and to test their allegiance to him.

IMPORTANCE:

Rebellion against God leads to disaster. God may use defeat to bring wandering hearts back to him. When all else is stripped away, we recognize the importance of serving only him.

THEME: Repentance**EXPLANATION:**

Decline, decay, and defeat caused the people to cry out to God for help. They vowed to turn from idolatry and to turn to God for mercy and deliverance. When they repented, God delivered them.

IMPORTANCE:

Idolatry gains a foothold in our hearts when we make anything more important than God. We must identify modern idols in our hearts, renounce them, and turn to God for his love and mercy.

THEME: Deliverance/Heroes**EXPLANATION:**

Because Israel repented, God raised up heroes to deliver his people from their path of sin and the oppression it brought. He used many kinds of people to accomplish this purpose by filling them with his Holy Spirit.

IMPORTANCE:

God's Holy Spirit is available to all people. Anyone who is dedicated to God can be used for his service. Real heroes recognize the futility of human effort without God's guidance and power.

TIMELINE

Exodus from Egypt 1446 B.C. (1280 B.C.)
Israelites enter Canaan 1406 (1240)
Period of the judges begins 1375 (1220)
Othniel 1367,327 (1202, 162)
Ehud 1309,229 (1184, 104)
Deborah 1209,169 (1192, 152)
Gideon 1162,122 (1146, 106)
Samuel born 1105 (1083)
Samson 1075,055 (1083, 063)
Saul anointed king 1050 (1045)
David becomes king 1010

An invitation is given to open your heart's door.

Rev. 3:20

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

References:

Holy Bible: King James Translation

Holy Bible: Living Bible Translation

Additional comments and charts are taken from: *Life Application Study Bible*. Illinois: Tyndale House 2007. Print

Matthew Henry Concise Bible Commentary

