

# Judges: Living for God in a Crooked Generation

## Judges 1

Today I want to start a series of lessons from the Old Testament book of Judges. But I wanted to start with that scripture from Paul's letter to the Philippians because there Paul gives a three part assignment that describes not only the first century New Testament times, but also our culture and mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Listen to verse 15 again: **that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.**

### Three-Part Assignment

There are three parts of this verse that I would like you to focus on. First, we are called to live out our family name, to be children of God. You are sons and daughters of the King, and you are to be distinguishable from other people in the world.

Secondly, this life is to be lived out in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. The word perverse, or depraved, describes moral decay that has gone about as far as it can go. In the midst of a crooked and depraved generation we are to be children of God. Anyone of us who reads the paper, or hears the daily news or pays attention to what is going on in our world at all, we can see the moral and spiritual decline of our society. If Paul lived in a crooked and perverse generation, certainly we do as well.

And the third point follows from that: we are to be lights in the world. Our lives are to be of such quality that against the darkness of the generation in which we live, we are to shine as lights bringing glory to God, and winning a lost world to Jesus.

We are the holy children of God, we live in a broken corrupt world, and we are to shine the light of Jesus Christ as we live in this darkness.

Now this is an impossible mission-being children of God, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, offering light-and yet it is the clear calling of everyone who belongs to the Lord.

I'd like you to turn with me now to the book of Judges in the Old Testament. The book of Judges is a history of crooked and perverse times. It was a time of compromise and moral decline among the people of God, who were surrounded by a culture that flaunted depraved behavior. So the lessons we can learn in this book from studying how God called out a people to be his children, to represent him in the midst of those times, will help us shine the light as children of God in our generation.

### Background of Judges

Let me just place Judges for you in the history of the Old Testament. The message of the Bible is that human beings were made perfect by God and then fell into sin. All of us are born in a state of rebellion against God, and we need an act of God to save us sin and death. Every one of us in every generation and every culture is separated from God and in rebellion against Him until God does something to save us. The Bible is the record of God reaching down to save His people from their sin.

God called a man named Abraham to father a nation that would tell the truth about God to every other nation. And God promised Abraham a land, but he and his son didn't possess the land; they were only wanderers in it. Abraham's great-grandsons eventually

went into Egypt. Four hundred years passed as this family became a mighty people who were subsequently reduced to slavery.

Then during the time of Moses God saved them from slavery in Egypt. Due to their unbelief they wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. Finally under the leadership of Joshua, they entered the land originally promised to Abraham and they began the conquest of the land that God promised them. God said He would bless them as they obeyed His covenant so that they could bless the rest of the world. Eventually Joshua died, and then they entered into a long period of decline in which they became barely distinguishable from their Canaanite neighbors. This is the period described by the book of Judges.

We who know the truth must be different from the unsaved world in which we live, in what we say, what we do, and who we are. God's people have always been tempted to compromise, to accept the culture of the times that makes us indistinguishable from those around us. That temptation confronted Israel over and over again; and to a large extent they gave in to it in the book of Judges.

My hope is that we will learn from their mistakes and from God's grace shown in Judges, that we could live as children of God amidst a perverse generation, displaying light to the world around us.

**Theme: No King in Israel, everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**

The writer of the book of Judges does something helpful for us. He makes "bookends" of the first and last verses of the book that gather up the themes that you'll find in the rest of the book. Judges chapter 1 verse 1 reads this way:

**Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass that the children of Israel asked the Lord, saying, "Who shall be first to go up for us against the Canaanites to fight against them?"**

The first few words of the book of Judges may at first glance seem to be only a helpful historical notation. "**After the death of Joshua,**" however, is a statement of drastic change in the spiritual health of the nation of Israel.

Joshua is a book of conquest, but Judges is a long, sad story of defeat. Joshua is a book of faith, Judges of unbelief and disobedience. Joshua depicts a people united in following God's man, but Judges is a book of division and anarchy. In Joshua, God's Word is central and men submit to His authority, while in Judges, Scripture is neglected and rejected. In Joshua, God's people say "we will not forget the Lord". The writer of Judges says "the people forgot the LORD."

The last verse of Judges highlights this difference again, Judges 21:25 says, **In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**

The period of the Judges was characterized by a rejection of God as King.

When Joshua died there were none left who were willing to bow the knee to the sovereignty of God and give all their heart to Him. There were none who responded to the claim of His lordship on their life without reservation. That's why the words Joshua addressed to the Israelites at the end of his life were so important. Turn a page back from Judges to the last chapter of Joshua.

**14 "Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River**

and in Egypt. Serve the Lord! 15 And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." 16 So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 17 for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed. 18 And the Lord drove out from before us all the people, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God." 19 But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. 20 If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good." 21 And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the Lord!" 22 So Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord for yourselves, to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses!" 23 "Now therefore," he said, "put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord God of Israel." 24 And the people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!" 25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem.

Then Joshua dies and verse 31 says, **Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the Lord which He had done for Israel.**

But when Joshua and his generation died, there was no one left with his commitment to obedience. God was supposed to be their King and Sovereign. They were to serve the Lord alone. But Judges says they forgot that the Lord was their king and **everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**

When everyone does what is right in his own eyes, there is no objective standard. Lies and truth, righteousness and evil are indistinguishable from each other. Everything starts with me: What do I want to do? What is to my advantage? What promotes me and my interest? That alone is the measure by which I will live my life. Doesn't that sound so much like the days in which we live?

In that time everyone did what was right in his own eyes, and the book of Judges records the horrible results. Rape, mutilation, murder, subversion, treachery, and graphic violence are all there. The pages of the book have heroes whose lives are stirring, but over and over again the flaws of the heroes and the greater flaws of the people stand out.

### Choosing Compromise

The descent into lawlessness and anarchy, as Judges will show, begins with compromise. It's selling out at minor points along the way, which leads to more selling out, which eventually leads to decay.

That's the story of the book of Judges. But in Judges is also the story, wonderfully, of how God acts in times of decay. When a crooked and perverse generation prevails, how do His children remain holy and offer hope to those around them? That's the story of the book of Judges, too, because God doesn't just abandon decayed cultures. He doesn't leave His people behind when they fail.

Let me take you briefly through the first chapter of this book. We won't read it all; I just want you to get a feel for this word of introduction. Verse 1:

**1 Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass that the children of Israel asked the Lord, saying, "Who shall be first to go up for us against the Canaanites to fight against them?" 2 And the Lord said, "Judah shall go up. Indeed I have delivered the land into his hand." 3 So Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me to my allotted territory, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I will likewise go with you to your allotted territory." And Simeon went with him. 4 Then Judah went up, and the Lord delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand; and they killed ten thousand men at Bezek. 5 And they found Adoni-Bezek in Bezek, and fought against him; and they defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. 6 Then Adoni-Bezek fled, and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. 7 And Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me." Then they brought him to Jerusalem, and there he died.**

The people of God were called to occupy the territory, to take over, to expel and exterminate those who were in opposition to them. But they were not called to humiliate their enemies as the Canaanites did. They were beginning to act like the nations around them. Instead of responding to the call of God to do what was right, to establish a beachhead where His name could be witnessed to, they learned from their enemies. They learned to become just like the people who were around them.

The account goes on and talks about the sacking of Jerusalem in verse 8. They sacked and burned it, but they didn't occupy it, and it was retaken by the Jebusites, as verse 21 mentions. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin both had Jerusalem at their border, and neither one of them would end up occupying it for a long time. Its Jebusite people diluted the worship of God as a result.

The first chapter of Judges contains other peculiar stories during this time of conquest. The stories here in Judges are similar to events that took place under Joshua's leadership, but here it is the story of compromise, not victory.

Let me just summarize the rest of chapter 1 by calling your attention to a couple of points. Verse 19 says this:

**So the Lord was with Judah. And they drove out the mountaineers, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland, because they had chariots of iron.**

And verse 28 says:

**And it came to pass, when Israel was strong, that they put the Canaanites under tribute, but did not completely drive them out.**

Beyond verse 28 we read more accounts of partial victory and disobedience to God's instructions. The moral and spiritual decay that characterizes the time of the Judges

came from these compromises. In chapter two we will see the pattern of defeat that will repeat itself again and again, in cycle after cycle of compromise and sin. Each time God in his grace comes in and delivers the people, only to have them enter another cycle of defeat.

The great lesson of this book, then, is that we must take God seriously about the enemy. Jesus Christ has come to save us from our sins -- not to allow us to settle down to live all our lives with them. He has come to drive them out from us and to separate us from them. If we do not take God seriously about these things that we call trivial we have compromised and we are on our way to moral collapse.

Let us beware for ourselves! Let the truth of this book burn into your mind and burn out any easy going toleration of the unholy or questionable thing. We can never enjoy God's promised rest and blessing for long if we tolerate only partially crushed sins to continue with us. If we "flirt" with questionable things because they seem harmless, we will soon find ourselves in shackles to the desires of the flesh.

We are all too familiar with compromise. We choose to do less than God is calling us to do. We pad an expense account. We live with prayer lives that are mediocre, intermittent, and shallow rather than learning to pray in any depth. We experience thought lives that have all sorts of inappropriate fantasies in them, and we never attempt to judge them or turn to God for help. We let our temper explode and overwhelm. We don't do the hard work of going back and confronting what needs to be confronted and being freed from it.

The mission to which God has called us is to be children of God in a crooked and perverse generation, lights in the world. The only hope for our decaying world is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There are people around us on every side who are tragically sad and lost because they don't know the Lord, and our responsibility is to be true to Him from the heart so that we can offer them hope.

So as we go through Judges God wants to talk to you! He wants to communicate that...

- A. You are prone to compromise and sin.
- B. You need a Savior.
- C. You need spiritual renewal.