

“Who Needs a King?”

Judges 21:25

*“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”*

Judges 21:25 (ESV)

Today we begin a new series on the book of Samuel. While next week I’ll begin with what we know as 1 Samuel, originally the books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel were considered one volume. When you hear me say “Samuel,” that is what I’ll be referring to.

In order to help you understand the book of Samuel better, what I’m actually going to do today is give you an overview of the *whole book* of Judges. Why start with Judges? The answer is relatively simple.

To begin with you need to know at least one fact about the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) that is often overlooked. This fact is that the Hebrews categorized everything in their Bible into one of three genres: The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.<sup>1</sup>

The Law refers to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible: Genesis-Deuteronomy). The Writings refer to what is commonly known as “wisdom literature” (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon). The Prophets category encompasses everything else, including, and especially important for us, the books that we commonly view as “historical books.”

In other words, all of the “historical books” in the Old Testament were considered to be prophetic writings. This is important to know because, while these books record true history, their purpose is greater than that. They were written to persuade their original audiences and us of something.

In the case of Samuel, the history recorded documents Israel’s transition from a loose confederation of tribes into a unified nation under a king. The purpose of the book is to persuade us that the only king who can unite Israel and help her to fulfill her destiny as a blessing to the world is a king like David, in spite of his flaws.

The reason I want to begin with the book of Judges is because, like Samuel, its goal is to persuade us of something. That “something” is why Israel needs a king in the first place. In other words the purpose of the book of Judges is to make the case that *Israel (and we) needs a king.*<sup>2</sup>

We’ll look at the three reasons that Israel (and we) need a king by considering a big-picture outline of the book of Judges. That outline is as follows:

---

<sup>1</sup> Also known as the *tanakh*. An acronym for *Torah* (the Law); *Nevi'im* (the Prophets); and *Ketuvim* (the writings).

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Judges makes the case that Israel needs a king from the line of Judah, not Benjamin.

- I. Faltering Conquest (Judges 1-2:5)
- II. Cycles of Good and Bad under the Judges (Judges 2:6-16)
- III. Anarchy without a King (Judges 17-21)

### **The Faltering Conquest (Judges 1-2:5)**

In Israel's history up to this point, they had been delivered from bondage in Egypt and given the mandate to conquer the land of Canaan (the Promised Land). While the conquest started relatively successfully as seen in the book of Joshua, it didn't continue this way. The very first line in the book of Judges is a question, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?"

The question is a question of leadership. Who will lead us? God answers, "Judah..." In fact, Judah does lead for a time, and God blesses them by giving the Canaanites into their hands. However, a problem arises: everyone else fails!

- The house of Benjamin did not drive out the inhabitants of Jerusalem (1:21).
- The house of Joseph cut a deal with an inhabitant of Bethel and let him live because of his assistance. He went on to build a city (1:22-26).
- The tribe of Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean...they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out (1:27-29).
- The tribes of Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan all failed (1:29; 30; 31; 33; 34).

Their problem, at the end of the day, was unbelief and disobedience. God delivered them from Egypt and promised them that he would give them the land. They were to take it by faith. What they lacked was a leader, a king, who would lead them in conquering their foes by keeping covenant with God and believing His promises.

What's this got to do with us? Everything. Let me ask you a question, whether you are a Christian or not. Isn't your life one long string of faltering or failed conquests? You try to overcome besetting sins or "bad habits" and over and over again you fail. Can anything help? The answer is "yes"—a king. Fortunately for you and me, there is such a king. His name is Jesus. He conquered sin where you and I failed. He even bore the punishment that our unbelief and disobedience merited. Not only this, but He promises all who trust in Him not only victory over sin and death here and now, but that He, in fact, will deliver us into not just the Promised Land, but into a new heaven and new earth.

If "faltering conquest" doesn't convince you that you need a king, perhaps the next portion of the book of Judges from when it takes its name will persuade you.

### **Cycles of Good and Bad Under the Judges (2:6-16)**

After the narrative of Israel's faltering conquest of the land, we're given the story of Joshua's death and this transitions us into the time of "Cycles of Good and Bad Under the Judges." What we see here are the same cycles happening over and over.

Starting at 2:13, we see a summary of the cycle they repeat over and over:

“They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.” (Judges 2:13-19 ESV)

In summary, Israel sins; God turns them over to their sins; they despair and cry out for deliverance; God pities them and sends a “judge” to deliver and lead them.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, the judge dies and the people fall back into their sin and the cycle begins again.

There are twelve different judges whose stories we are told and the order in which they are presented is just as important as the stories themselves. The first “judge” we see is Othniel and, for the sake of argument, he’s “perfect.” By this I mean that as the story is recorded he does nothing wrong for forty years. As the narrative progresses through each successive judge, we see a progressive slide down both in their effectiveness and their faithfulness.

The last judge recorded is Samson and, while he’s redeemed in the end, he is a picture of everything bad that was going on in Israel. The point is that while the judges offered temporary help and deliverance for Israel, at the end of the day, they weren’t good enough. They weren’t able to break these cycles of good and bad. Only one person could break these cycles of good and bad, leading Israel in and to faithfulness to God’s covenant—a king.

What’s this got to do with you? Everything. Let me ask you another question? Whether you are a Christian or not, is your life anything more than “cycles of good and bad”? You stray from God and then something bad happens; you’re delivered and are thankful for a while and then you stray—over and over. The only thing that can break these cycles of good and bad is a king—Jesus.

Jesus came and delivered us from our sins once and for all. So instead of living in cycles of good and bad, we live with purpose and direction. And when we fall or stray, our great God not only graciously forgives, but in fact, pursues us and reigns us in.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word for “to judge” is *shaphat*, which also means “to lead.” This said, with the exception of one person, Deborah, who heard some judicial cases, all Israel’s judges were military leaders.

If a faltering conquest and cycles of good and bad fail to convince you, there is one more argument the writer of Judges employs and that is the argument of *anarchy without a king*.

### **Anarchy without a King (17-21)**

Chapter 16 is the last we hear of judges in this book. In chapter 17 the focus turns to Israel's preachers. In other words, if you thought things were bad under the reign of the judges, under religious leaders it is worse.

The primary example in these chapters is the story of a Levite sojourning with his concubine through the hill country of Ephraim. He stops for the night near Jerusalem and is put up for the night by an old man who urges him not to stay near the city square. During the night men from the tribe of Benjamin come and demand that the Levite be sent outside that they may "know" him (19:22). Does this remind you of anything? It should. The language is almost exactly the same as the language and the actions that brought God's judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah! And this is Israel! It gets worse.

The Levite hands over his concubine to the men. They abuse her throughout the night and, in the morning, he finds her dead on the doorstep. At this, "he entered his house, he took a knife, and taking hold of his concubine he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel" (Judges 19:29 ESV).

The reason he cut her up and sent her to Israel was because, essentially, he was making a declaration of war against the tribe of Benjamin saying, "Whoever does not come and fight with me, what has happened to this woman [normally an animal], will happen to you." Needless to say, mayhem ensued.

The summary of this story and the whole book is, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25 ESV) In other words, the remedy for Israel's self-destructive impulses was, apparently, a king.

What's this got to do with you? Everything. Let me ask you another question. While your life might not be as crazy as some of the things we've seen in the book of Judges, how successful have you been or are you at overcoming your own self-destructive impulses or running your life or family? If you're honest, you'll say, "not very." The only thing that can both deliver you and guard you from your own self-destructive impulses is a king. There is one—His name is Jesus. After He conquers our sin and breaks the cycles of good and bad in our lives He says, "Follow me...I'll not only protect you from your enemies without, but I'll defeat the enemy within."

Do you see your own need for a king? Do you have relationship with the only king who can meet those needs? Think about that as we move forward and consider the book of Samuel.