

JUDGES – SAVIOURS OF THE NATION

The book of Judges begins with the situation that followed the death of Joshua. His departure had severed the last link between the Israelites and the slavery of Egypt. A new generation arose. These people knew nothing of the hardships suffered by their fathers, and ease and prosperity turned their hearts away from God. There were still pockets of Canaanites left unsubdued, and the temptation to slide into the easy-going, pleasure-seeking fertility religions of their neighbours proved too great.

The great Moses had warned the Israelites this would happen, and also of the consequences. God responded by putting painful pressure on His erring people to bring them to their senses

“... all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that He had done for Israel ... They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. 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.” Judges 2:10, 14, 15

When, however, the people repented and recognized their folly, the Lord was quick to forgive, and sent heroes, called **Judges** in the Scripture record, to deliver them from their oppressors. The book of Judges gives fascinating pocket biographies of these courageous men (and in one case a woman), who were called to risk their lives to save the nation. To understand the true greatness of these leaders you need to use some imagination, putting yourself in their shoes as you read, and feeling the pressures facing them. Every word counts. Let's look at one or two examples.

Deborah, in the fourth chapter of Judges, was literally a judge, that is she held courts of justice where the people came to have their cases heard – the Levites were no longer performing this duty, now people had turned away from God. She was also a prophetess, inspired from time to time by the Spirit of the Lord. Hazor, destroyed by Joshua over a century before, had been rebuilt. Its new ruler had access to the latest advances in metal technology, and assembled an army accompanied by chariots with iron fittings that enabled them to run faster. Jabin used his military strength to dominate Israel and put them under tribute, and they groaned under the heavy burden.

Deborah called on **Barak**, whose Hebrew name means Lightning, to raise an Israelite army and attack Jabin, promising him God would give him victory. Barak had cold feet, and insisted he would only go if she came along too. With some difficulty he persuaded volunteers from the northern tribes to join his troops, and his poorly armed forces assembled as instructed on the **Hill of Tabor**, which still projects today out of the Valley of Jezreel. He had 10,000 men, but the enemy force ranged against him included 900 chariots under the command of Jabin's general **Sisera**. They waited for him on the broad, flat plain – ideal for chariot manoeuvres.

Surprisingly, Barak thrashed Sisera. His soldiers chased the fleeing enemy to the far end of the Valley of Jezreel. How did he achieve this amazing victory? Here we have to read the narrative carefully. We notice first that Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled away on foot. Then in chapter five we have a celebratory battle ode composed to thank God for the victory (there are several of these in the Old Testament) in which it speaks of heavy rain, and the brook Kishon sweeping the enemy away. Putting these hints together we can visualise a sudden heavy rainstorm, swelling the river and turning the clay soil of the valley to mud. The chariot wheels stick fast, and the enemy loses all his advantage. It was typical of the way

God's timely use of natural forces can change the balance of power in minutes. But we are left deeply impressed by a man who, faced with tremendous odds, was prepared to go into battle believing that God would not let him down. That quality the Bible calls faith. It is essential we also have it, if we are to please God.

Gideon, another character listed alongside Barak in Hebrews chapter eleven, the New Testament chapter of heroes, is also said to have been "*made strong out of weakness*". In his time the people of God had turned to the worship of **Baal**, the fertility god of the Canaanites, and **Ashtoreth**, his lascivious consort. Even Gideon's father, headman of the village, had decided to go along with the trend, building an altar to Baal. God, ever patient, waited for His people to repent. To jog their consciences He allowed the **Midianites**, descendants of Lot, to raid their farms and steal their produce. Their lives became a misery.

Gideon was busy threshing his wheat, not on the village threshing floor where the give-away cloud of chaff would be visible from a distance, but uncomfortably in a below-ground winepress. Here an angel of the Lord visited him. The stranger looking down at him heard his complaint that God seemed to have abandoned His people, and challenged him to go himself and deliver Israel. His first assignment was to destroy his father's altar and build a new one to the God of Israel. He did this by night to avoid publicity. He was then instructed to gather the tribes together for a confrontation with the Midianites. Untrained in battle, he did that, but began to have doubts as to his ability. He asked for a sign, and God gave it to him. He asked for another one, and God gave him that too. Then, to his dismay, the angelic commander suggested he should reduce his forces down to a mere 300. God was going to show His people that it is not human strength that brings victory, but faith in Him. On the battle night Gideon was instructed to set his men in three groups of 100 around the camp of the Midianites. They were to lift up blazing torches, blow trumpets and cry '*the sword of the Lord and of Gideon*'. The effect was dramatic. The enemy soldiers attacked each other in the darkness, and then in dire panic fled downhill and across the Jordan. Gideon, the timid hero, became the judge of Israel, and the land had rest for forty years. Again, it is easy to read these thrilling stories, but we need to think through the courage it takes to abandon yourself into the hands of the unseen God, believing He will not let you down.

The book of Judges covers a period of 500 years, and can be characterised by this phrase –

"... Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Judges 17:6

It was time for a reform, and God would bring this about through a new form of leader – a king.