

Synthetic Bible Studies

Containing an outline study of every book of the Bible
with suggestions for Sermons, Addresses and
Bible Expositions

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LESSON ELEVEN

JUDGES AND RUTH

The story of the book of Judges is something like this: While Joshua and the elders of that generation lived, (those who had personally known the wonders of the Lord), the people continued in measurable obedience to the divine law. But when they died, and another generation came on the scene, there was a steady decline. They had made the way easy for this, by failing to drive out all the Canaanites from amongst them, as we saw in the last chapter. The proximity of these corrupt heathen people began to act like leaven in the dough. Israel intermarried with them, and by degrees was led into idolatry by them. This weakened their power so that from conquerors they became the conquered. They turned their back upon GOD, who, in a sense, turned His back upon them, allowing them to be taken captive by their enemies, and sorely oppressed.

In their distress they would repent and cry out unto Him, when He would deliver them through the instrumentality of some man, miraculously endued, called a judge. As long as this man lived they would be held in obedience, but on his decease a relapse into sin would follow, and the same round of experience be repeated.

The Preface to the Book

The story as told above is outlined for us very distinctly in 2:6-19, which takes the place of a preface to the whole book, and suggests that a spiritual outline of its contents might be held in

mind in four words:

Sin,
punishment,
repentance,
deliverance.

If you will look at the chronology suggested in the margin at chapter 1, and again at chapter 16, you will perceive it to be estimated that about 300 years was the period covered by the judges; to which should be added, however, the years of Eli and Samuel (also judges), in the following book, and which increases the time to 330 years, more or less. And yet this does not agree with Paul's words in Acts 13:20.

A perfectly satisfactory explanation of this cannot as yet be given, but it should content for the present to know that the data in Judges are somewhat obscure, and that the calculations of our commentators as indicated in the marginal chronology may have to be changed. This matter of Bible chronology will be referred to more particularly later on.

The Number of Judges

How many judges are named in the book?

At first you may reply 13, but the usurped rule of Abimelech, the fratricide, chapter 9, is not usually counted, thus limiting the number to 12. Take a sheet of paper and write down for yourself the name of each judge and the name of the people from whom he delivered Israel, and also some peculiarity in his history that will differentiate him from the others in your thought, and aid you to recall him.

Familiarize yourself especially with the names of the leading judges, those to whose doings the largest space is given, i. e., Othniel, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. And, in addition, acquaint yourself thoroughly with the names of the heathen nations referred to - Mesopotamia, Moab, Philistia, Canaan, Midian.

Now look on the map, or examine a Bible dictionary, and see where these peoples were located with reference to Israel - on the north, east, south and west. This raises one or two questions:

Was the whole of Israel in captivity to each of these peoples at different times, or only those tribes of Israel in closest proximity to each? And if the latter be our conclusion, as seems likely, did each judge rule over the whole of Israel at any one time, or only over so many of the tribes as were by him delivered from bondage?

The latter seems the more probable idea, and gives a different conception to the period altogether. It indicates that the periods of these judges were not necessarily successive, and two or more may have been ruling at the same time in different parts of the land. It was this unsatisfactory state of things, as we shall see, that was instrumental finally, in moving the people to demand a king.

The Division of the Book

The peculiar nature of this book does not lend itself easily to divisions as in the other cases, but your reading may have led you to recognize an outline not unlike the following:

1. Introductory, 1:1-3:4.
2. History of the judges, 3:5-16:31.
3. Particular details of evil, 17:1-21:25.

In the introductory portion,

- which tribe is given the distinction after the death of Joshua?
- what statement in chapter 1 repeatedly illustrates the lack of faith and obedience on Israel's part?
- what punishment fell on them for this (2:23)?

Under the second general division there are several things to dwell upon.

For example, the deed of Ehud.

It makes the blood run cold to read of it, but remember he was not a murderer, but a warrior. The whole world has always made a distinction between these two.

- was it an act of personal revenge, or patriotic and religious fervor?
- is the deed approved in Scripture?

This question brings up an important qualification that should be applied in countless instances in the Bible, of a similar character. A distinguished commentator justly calls attention to the fact that there hangs a shadow over the official career of this man. His name is not praised in Israel, nor is it said the Spirit of the Lord Was upon him, nor that he judged Israel. These omissions may be without significance, but are they not noticeable? It has been stated that while his cause was pure, the same cannot be said of any other such assassination in history.

To a certain extent these qualifying remarks in the case of Ehud's act may be applied to that of Jael under the judgeship of Deborah. I cannot but agree with others that while she acted under a divine commission, and is, in fact, commended, yet she appears to have transcended proper limits in the means employed.

These are questions, however, too deep for my soul to fathom, and I would be careful not to be found replying against GOD.

Material for a Bible Reading

Pursuant to our custom, when opportunity offers we want to indicate good material for young preachers and others to use in the conducting of religious meetings. The history of the next judge, Gideon, furnishes such material. The theme might be styled "*The Gospel in the History of Gideon's Judgeship.*"

Carefully review the facts, and observe how they illustrate the following points:

1. Punishment follows sin (6:1-6).
2. Repentance precedes deliverance (6:7-10).

In this case note that a prophet was sent to Israel before a deliverer, and that the whole tone of his message was intended to convince of sin.

3. Deliverance is wholly through faith, as indicated,

- (1) in the selection of an obscure and uninfluential leader (6:14-16);
- (2) in the insignificant army (7:1-7);
- (3) in the foolish weapons (7:16-23).

4. Faith rests upon evidence, as indicated in the signs and tokens given to Gideon:

- (1) the fire out of the rock (6:21, 22);
- (2) the dew and the fleece (6:36-40);
- (3) the dream of the Midianite (7:9-15).

It will be easy to show how under the Gospel, GOD does not call on men to accept JESUS CHRIST for salvation without affording abundant evidence on which their faith may rest. Let us get hold of these facts in Israel's history in order to use them for GOD's glory and the good of souls in this way.

Did Jephthah Slay His Daughter?

The chief interest for us in the history of the next most prominent judge is perhaps stated in the preceding question, which presents another of the exceptional occasions when we might step aside from the main purpose of these lessons to explain a difficulty, or interpret an expression. It is to be wished that the turning aside in this case could settle anything, but it cannot.

Opinions about Jephthah's act have always differed, and always will, and the circumstance only affords another illustration of the wisdom of concentrating attention upon more profitable things.

On the face of it, the record gives justification to the belief that he actually sacrificed his daughter, "impelled by the dictates of pious but unenlightened conscience," and so many commentators believe. And yet, happily, there is another view to be taken, which, without serious violence to the text, puts all concerned in a very different light, and supposes that the fulfillment of the vow consisted in the consignment of the maiden to a life of perpetual maidenhood.

Those who have access to Lange's commentary, or the Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia (article "Jephthah"), will find in either a very satisfactory treatment of the case. Perhaps the wish is father to the thought, but so far as the opinion of the writer is worth anything, it seems inclined towards this latter view.

Was Samson a Suicide?

The question about Jephthah is nearly matched by this concerning the succeeding judge, which, however, is capable of a more satisfying answer.

That he was not a suicide is evident from his penitent and prayerful spirit at the last, from the fact that he was acting as a public magistrate in what he did, dying for his country and his GOD, and yet not seeking death except as it was the inevitable consequence of duty done. Hebrews 11:32, honors him in the ranks of the noble witnesses to faith.

The history of Samson, like that of Gideon, is very rich in spiritual teaching, and material for Bible readings and addresses.

The fact that he himself was a Nazarite brings forward a typical relation to CHRIST (Matthew 2:23). His history identifies another of the manifestations of JESUS in the Old Testament (13:3-23). Verse 23, just referred to is a text full of meat for a good sermon on such a theme as "*GOD's Love for Man Demonstrated by His Acts.*"

Verse 25 of the same chapter illustrates the anointing of the HOLY SPIRIT for service as distinguished perhaps from the infilling of the same Spirit for holiness. Of course the remarkable physical power of Samson is only to be accounted for in this way. It was not in his hair, else there would have been no need that the "**Spirit of the Lord**" should come upon him. The growth of his hair was only a token of his consecration, not the consecration itself, and when he failed to withstand Delilah, it was the surrender of the latter rather than the former that brought evil upon him.

Particular Details of Evil

This division will require no particular explanation further than the statement that it traces the evils of the time incident to the absence of a fixed and strong government, or more truly, the absence of obedience to GOD (21:25).

We see:

- the decay of the priesthood,
- the growth of the spirit of individualism, and
- the spread of licentiousness and passion.

The two events are:

- (1) the history of Micah's idolatry (chaps. 17, 18), and
- (2) the history of the crime at Gibeah (chaps. 19-21).

The Book of Ruth

The contents of this book are very simple, and tell their own story. During what period did the

event occur (1:1)? The authorship is supposed to be the same as Judges, and attributed to Samuel. The chief interest in the book for us, outside of its own intrinsic beauty, is found in the genealogical table at the end, quoted by Matthew, and showing Ruth to have been an ancestress of CHRIST. As without this little book that fact would have remained unrevealed, we see a sufficient reason why the HOLY SPIRIT should have caused it to be placed in the sacred canon.

~ end of Lesson 11 ~
