

Doing Your Own Thing: The Book of Judges

By David Feddes

The Book of Judges is gripping, but sometimes it's also pretty gross. It's exciting, but it can also be disgusting. There's a lot going on in this book and some very lively characters, and it's seldom boring. But it certainly can be disturbing at times. So, let's look at this Book of Judges and consider the main theme. It's a time when people do their own thing, when they don't recognize any king—not even God—as their King.

The Book of Judges begins with a couple of chapters giving an overview of things. Then it goes on throughout a big chunk of the book to tell us about different judges—rugged heroes who did various things. And then the last chapters, from chapter 17 through 21, give a few incidents that occurred at unspecified times during the period of the judges that are very revealing about those wild times.

Forgetting and forsaking

Judges 2:10 gives us maybe as chilling words as you'll find anywhere in the Bible. “After that whole generation of the people [who had lived for the Lord under Joshua] had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). Think about that. They didn’t know the Lord. They were clueless about what he had done.

Why was this? Was it that the older generation didn't do well in passing along the truth and living it out? Or was it that an ornery, obnoxious younger generation wouldn't listen? Or was it both? At any rate, it's possible for a generation to come along who just doesn't know God and doesn't know the stories of what he's done.

“Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. In his anger against Israel, the Lord handed them over to raiders, who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist... They were in great distress. Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them” (Judges 2:11–17).

It's almost like you've got a movie script writer who's written a script, and then a movie is made of it. And then a couple decades later, they use the same script for another movie with slightly different characters, but pretty much the same script. That's what happens in Judges. Judges 2 is giving us an overview of how things went again, and again, and again.

“Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving

and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways” (Judges 2:18–19).

That's how the story goes. Every 40 years or so, things get so miserable that people cry out to the Lord for help. He sends a rescuer. And then, as soon as they forget the rescuer, they go right back to their old ways again.

Nasty Heroes

When you read the Book of Judges, you find that even the heroes are often more savage than saintly. These are the kind of times they are. The ordinary people are pretty bad, and that's the focus at the end of Judges in chapters 17 through 21. But the heroes that we read about from chapters 3 through 16 often make us wonder, “What in the world? Are these the good guys?” Well, when the good guys are pretty bad, just think about how bad the bad people must be. The heroes are more savage than saintly.

Ehud, one of the early judges, comes as a diplomat bringing tribute payment. And he pretends to have a secret message for King Eglon. And he's got this long sword strapped to the inside of his thigh. He gets alone with the king to deliver this message. “As the king rose from his seat, Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh, and plunged it into the king's belly.” The sword goes all the way in, and the king’s fat swallows up the sword. Ehud heads out the window, leaves the fat king wallowing in his own blood, and raises up a rebellion (Judges 3:15–26). Now, Ehud did save the people from that nasty king, but this was not exactly the noblest and most upfront of deeds—to carry with you a hidden sword and pretend to be a negotiator, and then shove a sword into a guy's gut.

Then there's **Jael**. Deborah is a woman leading during this time in Israel when men are refusing to lead. Deborah receives a message from God that a man named Barak should lead a battle against the enemy. But Barak says to Deborah, “I won't go unless you go with me.” Deborah says, “Well then, the honor of the victory is going to go to a woman and not to you” (Judges 4:8–9). And what woman does the honor go to? Jael. In the battle, the enemy is routed. The enemy general Sisera is on the run. He finds himself at the tent of a woman named Jael. She smiles and welcomes the poor, tired, fleeing general into her tent and says, “How can I help you?” She offers him milk and shows him great hospitality and lulls him to sleep. Then she grabs a spike and pounds it through his head (Judges 4:17–21). Maybe you don't want to preach on this passage and then say, “Go thou and do likewise! Be nice to somebody, lull them to sleep, and then pound a spike through their head.” But that was how Jael killed this wicked enemy general.

Another flawed hero: **Gideon**. Gideon is at a threshing floor hiding from the enemy Midianites, and the angel of God comes to Gideon and says, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior” (Judges 6:12). And Gideon says, “If the Lord is with us, why have all these bad things happened to us?” (Judges 6:13). Gideon is griping about how he's been treated. But the first thing God says to him is, “You need to go destroy that idol of Baal in your father's own household” (Judges 6:25). Gideon can't understand why the Lord, the God of Israel, would be upset with the Israelites—and his own father has an idol of Baal right within his household.

Gideon, after destroying that idol, is not exactly Mr. Strong Faith. Again and again and again, he is asking for signs from God to show him that it's really God speaking to him, that he needs to go out and do this (Judges 6:36–40). Finally, he wins a great victory. He has his great moment, when by faith he triumphs—he and just 300 men outfoxing the whole army—and God causes that army to fight against each other (Judges 7:19–22). And what happens afterward? Gideon makes another idol (Judges 8:27). He marries many wives (Judges 8:30), and a son of one of the women who's not his wife murders all the other brothers (Judges 9:5). Some hero Gideon is!

Jephthah is yet another hero. His mom is a prostitute. He's a chieftain, leading a band of outlaws and adventurers who are just grabbing whatever they can. All of a sudden, he's asked to help rescue Israel from some oppressors. He agrees to do so. But he makes a promise. He says, “If God gives me victory, the first thing I'm going to do when I get home is that whatever comes to greet me, I'm going to sacrifice to the Lord” (Judges 11:30–31). And what happens? He comes home from a great victory and his beautiful daughter, his only child, comes out—and the bonehead sacrifices her (Judges 11:34–39). He makes this terrible vow and then he carries through on it. And this guy Jephthah is one of the judges, one of the heroes.

And then there's **Samson**. Samson makes for some very lively reading, and he does amazing things with his tremendous strength that God gives him. But what kind of man is he? He's hot-tempered. He's supposed to be a Nazirite who keeps himself pure for the Lord, but he eats stuff from the body of the carcass of a dead lion (Judges 14:8–9). Lions were unclean animals. Samson wasn't supposed to touch unclean things, but he did. He is used by God through his hot temper to rescue Israel from the Philistines who are oppressing them, but not because Samson is such an all-around wonderful guy.

He decides that he likes women who are pagans. He likes Philistine women. He sees a woman he wants to marry. His parents say, “No, you shouldn't marry her! Can't you find a good Jewish girl?” He says, “I want her” (Judges 14:2–3). So they have the wedding. Samson gives a riddle at the wedding about the lion that he took honey from (Judges 14:12–14). The people whom he gives the riddle to can't figure it out, so they get really mad, and they tell Samson's wife-to-be that if she doesn't get the secret out of him, they're going to kill her (Judges 14:15). Well, she begs and whines and nags, and finally he gives the secret, and she tells it to those guys. They win the bet, and Samson has to give them 30 sets of clothing. What does he do? He goes out and kills 30 Philistines and takes their clothing and hands it over to the people that he lost the bet to (Judges 14:19). What a wonderful guy!

One time Samson spends all night with a prostitute (Judges 16:1). He gets up in the morning and finds out the Philistines have barred the gates of the city to keep him from getting away. What does he do? He grabs the gates of the city, rips them out—these big, heavy gates—and carries them 30 miles (Judges 16:3). Again, his tremendous strength of body is not exactly matched by tremendous strength of holiness and of wisdom.

Ultimately, Samson goes after another Philistine woman—Delilah. She's paid off by the Philistines to get his secret out of him (Judges 16:5). Finally, he tells her the secret: he belongs to the Lord, his strength comes from the Lord, and he's never cut his hair his entire life as a sign of dedication to the Lord (Judges 16:17). Delilah has Samson's hair cut off, and the Philistine come

to capture him. Samson rises up thinking he's going to overpower these Philistines as always. But he's lost his strength. They haul him off and gouge out his eyes (Judges 16:21). Samson's hair starts to grow again. One day the Philistines bring him into the temple of Dagon, one of their idols, to mock him. He's standing between two pillars that are holding up that whole temple with 3,000 people in it. Samson prays one last prayer: "Lord, let me get vengeance for my two eyes, and let me die with the Philistines" (Judges 16:28–30). Then he pulls down their temple and kills more enemies by his death than he did by his life. Samson is a man that God uses to break the power of oppressors, but he's not exactly someone of admirable and holy character.

Again and again, we find in the Book of Judges that even the heroes are often more savage than they are saintly. That's how grim a period this is—when everybody's doing his own thing, when everybody's doing what's right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6, 21:25). Even the leaders are not very much in tune with God. Still, the Lord does use flawed believers to carry out his plans. Some of these judges are listed in Hebrews 11 as some of the heroes of faith who did mighty exploits by God's power and by the faith that they had in God (Hebrews 11:32–34). Thank God, he does use very faulty and flawed people like these judges, maybe even people like you and me. At any rate, this was a wild, lawless time.

Spiritual amnesia

Let's get back to what we saw originally. "After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD ... In his anger against them, the Lord... sold them to their enemies all around... Then the Lord raised up judges who saved them... Yet they would not listen to their judges. (Judges 2:10-17). There is spiritual amnesia. They didn't know the Lord. They didn't know what he'd done for Israel. They forgot about these things. God would send punishment and enemies. Then he'd save them. But they would not listen. They forgot, and then they forgot, and then they forgot, and then they forgot, and then they forgot, and then they forgot. Getting a little tired of this movie yet? Well, God got mighty tired of that movie.

When you look at Israel and its enemies during the time of the judges, there were various nations that came in and oppressed them. But who was the real enemy? Well, it's like in the comic strip *Pogo*: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." We who keep forgetting the Lord. We who keep forgetting what he's done for us. We who keep forgetting to trust him. We who have spiritual amnesia. There are other enemies out there, and they can make our lives miserable, but the real enemy is us. That's the enemy we really need to face.

Free from all authority

Now, in the epilogue of Judges, those last five chapters, a statement is repeated again and again: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). "In those days Israel had no king" (18:1). "In those days Israel had no king" (19:1). They're not even honoring God as their king. "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). That is the last verse of the Book

of Judges—and a summary of the whole mess. It was a period in which people did their own thing.

We've seen what it was like in the lives of the judges themselves. And if even the heroes could be pretty savage, what about those who weren't considered among the heroes? Well, it really gets ugly. Here's what we see in these last few chapters of Judges.

- Homemade religion
- Rent-a-priest
- Rash curses and oaths
- Live-in lovers and unfaithfulness
- Perversion, gang rape, chopping up corpses
- Civil war and multiple massacres
- Courtship by killing or kidnapping

That's a real quick overview of those chapters. And if you look at the details, it is very ugly indeed.

Let's start with a little bit of homemade religion from a guy named Micah. Micah steals from his own mother, and his mother utters some terrible curse about what's going to happen to the person who stole from her. Micah gets a little scared and returns the money. “When Micah returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, she said, 'I solemnly consecrate my silver to the LORD for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol. I will give it back to you.'” (Judges 17:3). What a mom! “Oh son, you're such a good boy, you are so nice to be honest about stealing that money. We worship the Lord, and we know that the Lord loves carved images and idols. So, let's make this nice, cool, carved image for the Lord!” In God's Ten Commandments, the second commandment was: “You shall not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Exodus 20:4–5).

"Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some idols and installed one of his sons as his priest. In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 17:5-6). Hey, son, want to be a priest for a while? You look like the pastor. I made this idol after Mom cursed me and then blessed me. We made this cool idol that God really likes. Hey kiddo, let's have some religion together as a family—homemade religion.

Then somebody else comes by who's really part of the class who is supposed to take care of God's tabernacle—a Levite. They're supposed to serve the tabernacle of God, and this traveling Levite meets up with Micah. Then Micah said to the Levite, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels of silver a year, your clothes and your food." So the Levite agreed to live with him... Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house. And Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest” (17:10-13). It's rent-a-priest. The traveling Levite is looking for somebody to pay him off, and he'll do whatever they want, even be a priest for this idol. “Hey, I can make ten shekels a year. Good deal.” And what does Micah want? Results. Benefits from the Lord. This Levite is going to be an improvement on Micah's own son because Levites

are more professional. With a religious professional to help, God is going to pay him well. That's what religion is about: the ability to prosper.

Prosperity religion involves positive preaching. Some spies from the tribe of Dan visit Micah's house. They are wondering whether their mission will succeed. "The Levite told the spies from Dan what Micah had done for him, and said, 'He has hired me and I am his priest.' Then they said to him, 'Please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful.' The priest answered them, 'Go in peace. Your journey has the LORD's approval'" (Judges 18:4-6). The spies love it. We love hearing a guy who's a positive thinker. We love a preacher who tells us exactly what we were hoping to hear.

When these men went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the other household gods and the cast idol, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" They answered him, "Be quiet! Don't say a word. Come with us, and be our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one man's household?" Then the priest was glad. He took the ephod, the other household gods and the carved image and went along with the people. (18:18-20)

"So long, Micah!" says the priest. "I'm moving up in ministry. I'm heading for greener pastures and a higher paycheck and more people to impress." Micah is mad that they're stealing his gods and his priest. But the men of Dan say, "You'd better just shut up. If you don't, we're going to kill you." So Micah backs down.

Then they took what Micah had made, and his priest, and went on to Laish, against a peaceful and unsuspecting people. They attacked them with the sword and burned down their city... The Danites rebuilt the city and settled there... There the Danites set up for themselves the idols... They continued to use the idols Micah had made, all the time the house of God was in Shiloh. (18:27-31)

So there you have it: a homemade religion of a man and his mother. Then it kind of expands to hiring a professional priest and making some idols. And then a whole tribe comes along and buys out the priest and the idols and goes and massacres a whole town and takes over their territory. That's one slice of life in the time of the judges.

Civil war

Judges 19 provides another slice. A Levite is a minister with a mistress. He's got a concubine. But his live-in lover has an affair with another guy and moves out. But then she leaves that guy and goes back to her father's house. So this minister—this Levite—goes to her father's house, and they talk a while. Finally, they agree that the woman will go back home with this minister.

Where should they stay for the night on their trip back? They say, "We'd better not stay in Jebus [what would later be called Jerusalem] because those Jebusites can't be trusted. They're a bunch of pagans. Let's go to Gibeah, where we've got Israelite people living. That'll be a safer, better place to spend the night" (Judges 19:10-12). Well, not quite.

It turns out that the men of Gibeah act like the men of Sodom did centuries earlier. They want to rape a visitor. What does the minister—the Levite—do? He shoves his mistress, out the door and says, “Have at her.” He then locks the door again and stays with his host. All night long, the woman is raped by the men of Gibeah. The next morning, she's lying on the steps at the door to the house. The Levite minister opens the door and sees the woman lying there, and he's a real sensitive guy. He says, “Get up. Let's go” (Judges 19:27–28). But she doesn't move. She's dead.

The minister, being a very good and righteous man, thinks, “This is an outrage. I gave my woman to them to rape her, and they went and killed her. How awful of them!” So he chops her body up into twelve chunks and does a mass mailing. He sends a chunk of the woman to each of the twelve tribes of Israel and says, “A horrible thing has happened. It happened in Gibeah, which is a town of Benjamin. They won't punish the perpetrators, so we need to do something about it” (Judges 19:29–30).

What happens next? The Benjamites stand up for Gibeah, this town that had done such horrible things, and they fight with the Israelites who have come against them.

The Benjamites came out of Gibeah and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelites on the battlefield that day... the second day... they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites... On [the third] day twenty-five thousand Benjamite swordsmen fell... The men of Israel went back to Benjamin and put all the towns to the sword, including the animals and everything else they found. All the towns they came across they set on fire. (Judges 20:20-48)

The army of Israel goes throughout the whole land held by the tribe of Benjamin, and they wipe out all the towns: all the babies, all the children, all the men, all the women, all the animals, and they burn all the towns. The only survivors from the tribe of Benjamin are 600 warriors who had escaped.

“Oh no! What have we done?” says the Israelites. “We wiped out one of our fellow tribes, and all the women are dead! The whole tribe is going to disappear. That would be too bad!” (Judges 21:3, 6, 15). 600 Benjamite warriors have survived, but no Benjamite women have survived. That's a big problem. All the men of Israel have sworn they will never give their daughter to a Benjamite (Judges 21:1, 7, 18). They've got 600 Benjamite men who need wives or their tribe will go extinct, but no father in Israel can give his daughter to a Benjamite. What are they going to do?

Option #1: "Whose families can we kill?" The Israelites say to each other, "When we were gathering all our army together to fight the Benjamites and slaughter them, the town of Jabesh Gilead didn't send anybody. We should just kill them all. We'll kill all the men, we'll kill all the little kids, we'll kill everybody except the unmarried young girls, the virgins" (Judges 21:8–11). And that's what they do. They wipe out everybody in Jabesh Gilead, and they get 400 virgins. The Israelites figure, "That plan went pretty well, but we've still got a problem. The math doesn't work. We've got wives for 400 Benjamites, but we need 200 more women. What are we going to do now?"

Option #2: "What girls can we kidnap?" There's an annual festival at Shiloh for the Lord (Judges 21:19). A lot of this terrible stuff goes on in the name of worshipping the Lord. They say, "We can't actually give our daughters to these Benjamites, because we swore an oath that we wouldn't. But here's what we'll do. There's this dance, and when it's dark outside, and the girls are going home, there's a great opportunity. Let's just tell the Benjamites, 'You know what? We're going to look the other way. When the girls are leaving the dance, you guys just pounce on the one you want and grab her and carry her off. And you've got yourself a wife!'" (Judges 21:20–21). So that's what the Benjamite men do. They jump out of their hiding places, grab a girl, and carry her off. Before long, 200 girls have been snatched and 200 Benjamites have their wives.

That's what the age of the judges was like. We've seen what the heroes were like. We've seen how the ordinary people often behaved. And we might say, "What a bunch of barbarians! It's good that we're not like those people did back then! We're a lot more civilized and a lot more advanced." Oh, really?

Not Just Ancient History

- 60 million died in World War II; death camps; bombing cities; using nuclear weapons
- AIDS in South Africa: over half of *pastors* have been unfaithful, averaging 5 affairs.
- Births out of wedlock in Britain went from 4% in 1960 to 40% in 2000.
- In America: "Religion up; morality down."
- Prosperity preachers
- Consumers: "the church of your choice."

In the most advanced nations in the world—the nations of Western Europe and Japan and the United States—60 million people were killed in World War II. Germany was the most advanced civilization in many ways—in scholarship, in music, in art. And they had these terrible death camps. People on all sides were bombing entire cities. It wasn't just the Nazis; the British and the Americans would firebomb Dresden and deliberately try to start fires throughout the whole city, wiping out whoever was living there. It was the United States that chose to drop nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Boy, it's a good thing we're so civilized! Those people who lived back in the time of the Judges were not much good at killing compared to our modern ability to wipe out whole populations.

Do you think, "The people in the time of the judges were so sexually immoral, and their pastors were so bad." Well, AIDS has spread throughout many parts of the world. In South Africa, it spread especially quickly. And think about this: in a survey, over half of the pastors in South Africa had been unfaithful to their own wife. The average pastor had five affairs. We've advanced and come a long way, haven't we?

Births out of wedlock in Britain and in the United States went from 4% in 1960 to 40% by 2000. People just sleeping around, having kids. That's not counting all the abortions and all the babies who were killed. But we're not so sexually immoral like they were back in the time of the judges!

Before we declare ourselves civilized, we better pay more attention. Gallup, the foremost polling organization in America, did a major poll and it summarized the poll in four words: “Religion up, morality down.” People were claiming to be religious; they were claiming certain beliefs, but their behaviors were becoming worse and worse. It sounds like the time of the judges. They were very religious. They had their idols and homemade religion. But would talk about God, but they did not recognize God's authority and would not obey him. “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 21:25).

Today, throughout the world, the prosperity preachers are everywhere. The preachers who are driving luxury cars and wearing fancy wardrobes and living in splendid mansions and telling people, “If you hire a superb prosperity preacher like me, and if you come to my church, you're going to be blessed! You are going to prosper in everything you do!” Micah and his rent-a-priest couldn't have said it better. The prosperity preachers are always going to promising success, but the main success is their own prosperity. Jesus said, “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24).

Consumer religion is popular. “Attend the church of your choice.” What matters about a church is if it caters to your tastes and to your opinions. You do not recognize anybody else's authority. You want a church that encourages you in doing your own thing.

When you read the Book of Judges, be careful not to say, “Oh, just ancient history. Yawn! I'm so glad we've become more civilized.”

Forgetting and forsaking

There are two main strategies in leaving God behind—in forgetting and forsaking him as they did in the time of the judges. One is to deny that God is real. “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1). Atheism is one approach: “God doesn't exist.”

But there's another approach: “God is whoever I dream him up to be.” You make up your own god. As God says in Psalm 50:21, “You thought I was altogether like you.” Micah can say, “I'm making this idol for the Lord.” But the Lord doesn't want us making idols of him or idols for him. God hates idols. You can't just make up your own god and then declare it to be the Lord.

These two strategies are very common: deny that God is real altogether and become an atheist, or make up the religion that you would like to dream up, that makes you feel good.

There is a downside: “Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue” (Psalm 50:22). God, in his mercy, did send rescuers in the time of the judges—but only when the people called out to him for help. Forgetting and forsaking is a good way to get yourself torn to pieces.

A Cosmic Authority Problem

Here are a few recent examples of people who forget God or deny him altogether—and some even acknowledge that it's their own preference, not that they actually have any evidence.

Thomas Nagel, a professor at New York University, said, “I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God... It's that I hope there is no God. I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that... I have a cosmic authority problem.”

A cosmic authority problem—that's the same problem of people in Judges. Nagel does not want there to be a king. He wants to do what is right in his own eyes. That's the authority problem. And one way people with a cosmic authority problem comfort themselves is to say, “We're just here by accident. There is no God who made us. We're not responsible to any God.” Nagel is very aware of this. He says that scholars use “evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind.” These explanations often defy common sense, but at least they eliminate God. “Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning, and design as fundamental features of the world.” Why would you want to get rid of purpose and meaning and design? Well, behind purpose and meaning and design is a God who reigns—and you want to get rid of that reigning God so you have no king and can do your own thing.

Sometimes it's not professors but singers. John Lennon of The Beatles sang: “Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell, below us above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for and no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace. You may say that I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will live as one.”

What would happen if we imagined God away, and if nobody paid any attention to heaven or hell. In that same song, Lennon said, “Imagine no possessions.” When he died, he was worth 500 million dollars. Okay? He imagined a certain kind of world, but then he lived in another manner, and he was murdered by a deranged fan of his. Imagining will not relieve us of a true King who's reigning. It will only relieve us of the benefits from living beneath his reign and place us in the realm of chaos—that mess that is described in Judges.

A common phrase is “believing in yourself.” John Lennon, in another song—a lesser-known one—says, “I don't believe in Bible. I don't believe in Hitler. I don't believe in Jesus. [Notice he put Hitler and Jesus right next to each other.] I don't believe in Buddha. I don't believe in Beatles. I just believe in me. Yoko [his wife] and me. That's reality.” Believe in yourself.

A nastier singer: Marilyn Manson. He who grew up in an evangelical home and named himself after the suicidal actress Marilyn Monroe and the serial killer Charles Manson. He gave himself the name Marilyn Manson. He said, “Everything's a lie—pick the lie you like best, and I hope mine's the best.” Well, what's his lie? “We hate love. We love hate.” Another of his lines: “Kill God, kill your Mom and Dad, kill yourself.” If that happens to be your favorite lie, then you pick that lie. “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” You think it's right to be kind and loving? “We hate love. We love hate. Kill God, kill Mom and Dad, kill yourself.” Whatever you want to do, pick your lie.

Here's an email that I received from a Wiccan. She wrote, "Religion is a choice. There is no such thing as a true religion. I will say there is no true religion. We each have our own views and needs as far as religion is concerned." What that's saying is: there is no real God; I just make up my religion based on how I think of things and what I feel I need at the moment. I don't know how anybody can be comforted by knowing that their god is one they just made up, but that is the case here.

"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." It starts young. We're all self-centered. The littlest babies, as they are first learning to speak—one of their favorite words is "Mine!" Another favorite sentence: "I do it myself!" And for all of us, it seems our three favorite people are me, myself, and I. That's the philosophy of people in the Book of Judges. No king. I'm my own boss. I do what pleases me.

In the New Testament, James explains this whole dynamic:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? [There sure is plenty of fighting and quarreling in the Book of Judges.] Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? (James 4:1–4).

There's a lot to learn from the Book of Judges—and then from the rest of the Scriptures that comment on these things as well. We need a King. We need to be saved from ourselves, saved from doing our own thing, saved from doing what's right in our own eyes.

Freedom Under King Jesus

Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32). When Jesus was on trial before Pilate, he said, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world: to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37).

The Book of Judges is about what happens when people forget the King who sets them free, when they forget the truth that sets them free. We need King Jesus. And we have such a King, if we will accept him by faith and submit to him as our Lord, as our Ruler, as the one who directs our lives.

This has implications for national life as well. Whatever nation you're in, when you forsake the authority that has been revealed in the Scriptures, when you forsake the living God and try to just make up your government as you see fit, you're headed for some trouble.

One of the founders of the United States, Samuel Adams, said, "Human rights and freedoms may be best understood by reading and carefully studying the institutes of Jesus, the great Lawgiver

and Head of the Christian Church, which are to be found clearly written and promulgated in the New Testament.”

We've seen the chaos in the life of Israel during the times of the judges when they had nobody to govern them, when they had no rule of law, when they had forgotten God and his laws. Don't think it can't happen in our time and our nation. We can sink back into that kind of condition if we're like the people of Israel who forgot the Lord and forgot all that he had done and abandoned all that he had commanded.

As we read the Book of Judges, we can recognize the severity of our own sin, and we can also recognize the patience and mercy of God. Again and again and again, he rescued them when they cried out to him. Even though they had abandoned him, he did not abandon them. Still today, we can call to God—as individuals, as the church (which is often falling into terrible disrepair), as nations which have sinned terribly and which have all kinds of disgusting behaviors similar to those described in the Book of Judges. We need to return to God. That's what Judges calls us to do.

God said through the prophet Isaiah, "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness... I, the Lord, speak the truth; I declare what is right... There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other." (Isaiah 45:19, 21-22)

In the Book of Judges, people kept forsaking this God and making up their own god and following their own ways and ignoring or forgetting the truth. But there is no other truth. There is no other God.

Doing Your Own Thing: The Book of Judges

By David Feddes
Slide contents

Forgetting and forsaking

After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. (Judges 2:10-12)

Saved from enemies

In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist... They were in great distress. Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. (Judges 2:14-17)

Same old story

Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. (Judges 2:18-19)

Nasty Heroes

In the book of Judges, even the heroes are often more savage than saintly.

Ehud: comes as diplomat bringing payment, pretends to have secret message. "As the king rose from his seat, Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly."

Jael: welcomes General Sisera, lulls him to sleep, pounds a spike through his head.

Gideon: idol in his father's household, slow to believe God, made another idol after God-given victories; had many wives; son Abimelech murdered brothers.

Jephthah: prostitute's son, outlaw chieftain, sacrificed his only child to keep a foolish vow.

Samson: hot-tempered, vengeful, fell for prostitutes and pagan women

Nasty Heroes

- In the book of Judges, even the heroes are often more savage than saintly.
- The Lord used flawed believers to carry out his plans.
- This was a wild, lawless time.

Spiritual amnesia

After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD ... In his anger against them, the Lord... sold them to their enemies all around... Then the Lord raised up judges who saved them... Yet they would not listen to their judges. (Judges 2:10-17)

Facing the Enemy: Ourselves

Doing Your Own Thing

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 17:6)

In those days Israel had no king. (18:1)

In those days Israel had no king. (19:1)

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

Free from all authority

- Homemade religion
- Rent-a-priest
- Rash curses and oaths
- Live-in lovers and unfaithfulness
- Perversion, gang rape, chopping up corpses
- Civil war and multiple massacres
- Courtship by killing or kidnapping

Homemade Religion

When Micah returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, she said, "I solemnly consecrate my silver to the LORD for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol. I will give it back to you."

Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some idols and installed one of his sons as his priest. In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. (Judges 17:3-6)

Prosperity Religion

Then Micah said to the Levite, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels of silver a year, your clothes and your food." So the Levite agreed to live with him... Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house. And Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest." (17:10-13)

Positive Preaching

The Levite told the spies from Dan what Micah had done for him, and said, "He has hired me and I am his priest."

Then they said to him, "Please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful." The priest answered them, "Go in peace. Your journey has the LORD's approval." (18:4-6)

Moving Up in Ministry

When these men went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the other household gods and the cast idol, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" They answered him, "Be quiet! Don't say a word. Come with us, and be our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one man's household?" Then the priest was glad. He took the ephod, the other household gods and the carved image and went along with the people. (18:18-20)

Claiming the Blessing

Then they took what Micah had made, and his priest, and went on to Laish, against a peaceful and unsuspecting people. They attacked them with the sword and burned down their city... The Danites rebuilt the city and settled there... There the Danites set up for themselves the idols... They continued to use the idols Micah had made, all the time the house of God was in Shiloh. (18:27-31)

Romance Without Rules (ch. 19)

- Minister with a mistress
- The live-in has an affair; moves out, then back
- Gibeah acts like Sodom
- Giving woman to wolves
- Mr. Sensitive: “Get up; let’s go.”
- Mass mailing gory details

Civil War

The Benjamites came out of Gibeah and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelites on the battlefield that day... the second day... they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites... On [the third] day twenty-five thousand Benjamite swordsmen fell... The men of Israel went back to Benjamin and put all the towns to the sword, including the animals and everything else they found. All the towns they came across they set on fire. (Judges 20:20-48)

Creative Courtship

- 600 Benjamite warriors survived, but no Benjamite women survived.
- “Who gives this woman to this man?” “I don’t!”
- **Option #1: Whose families can we kill?** Slaughter everyone in Jabesh Gilead except 400 virgins.
- **Option #2: What girls can we kidnap?** Steal 200 girls from the Shiloh dance.

Not Just Ancient History

- 60 million died in World War II; death camps; bombing cities; using nuclear weapons
- AIDS in South Africa: over half of *pastors* have been unfaithful, averaging 5 affairs.
- Births out of wedlock in Britain went from 4% in 1960 to 40% in 2000.
- In America: “Religion up; morality down.”

- Prosperity preachers
- Consumers: “the church of your choice.”

Forgetting and forsaking: Two strategies

- **Deny that God is real:** “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1).
- **Make up your own god:** “You thought I was altogether like you” (Ps. 50:21).

Downside: “Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue” (Ps. 50:22).

A Cosmic Authority Problem

“I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God... It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that... I have a cosmic authority problem.” (Thomas Nagel)

Sigh of Relief

Scholars use “evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind.” These explanations often defy common sense, but at least they eliminate God. “Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning, and design as fundamental features of the world.” (Thomas Nagel)

Imagine

Imagine there's no Heaven. It's easy if you try. No Hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today... Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for and no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace... You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will live as one. (John Lennon)

Believing in Myself

I don't believe in Bible... I don't believe in Hitler, I don't believe in Jesus... I don't believe in Buddha ... I don't believe in Beatles. I just believe in me, Yoko and me, that's reality. (John Lennon)

Pick Your Favorite Lie

“Everything is a lie—pick the lie you like best, and I hope mine is the best.”

“We hate love, we love hate.”

“Kill God, Kill Your Mom and Dad, Kill Yourself.”

(Marilyn Manson)

Our own views and needs

Religion is a choice. There is no such thing as a true religion. I will say there is no true religion; we each have our own views and needs as far as religion is concerned. (email from a Wiccan)

Starting Young

Favorite word: **Mine!**

Favorite sentence: **I do it myself!**

Three favorite people: **Me, Myself, & I**

What causes fights?

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? (James 4:1-4)

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There Is No Other

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