

**The Judge of Judges**

“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

Within a generation, Joshua’s fears for the people of Israel were realized. The large stone set up under the oak near the holy place of the Lord bore silent witness to their broken promises and misplaced loyalties. The spiritual and sexual pressures of the surrounding culture were too much for the post-Joshua generation. They had received from their parents an emotional faith, largely unsupported by concrete actions. Joshua had insisted that the “foreign gods” be expelled, but it is apparent that while they gave themselves to God verbally they did not yield to the Lord practically. Daily life was shaped by cultural forces rather than their covenant commitment to Yahweh. The Israelites were faithful in theory but not in practice. When the angel of the Lord, an expression reserved for the Lord himself, confronted the nation, the people “wept aloud” and they called the place Bokim, which meant “weepers” (2:1-5). Some scholars have identified Bokim with Bethel (20:18-28; 21:1-4). Once again the people reacted emotionally. They wept, they wailed, they sacrificed, but nothing changed.

An emotional repentance is not necessarily a true repentance. Animal sacrifices without “a broken and contrite heart” are worthless (Ps 51:17). As the prophet Joel said years later, “Rend your heart and not your garments” (Joel 2:13; see Cundall, *Judges and Ruth*, p.65). The gods of the culture remained intact and the Israelites intermarried with the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and the Jebusites. Their faithlessness was not measured subjectively, but factually. “They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods” (3:6).

The story of salvation history is about to enter the “dark ages” of Israel’s history

and it would be nice if we could say that the message of Judges has nothing to do with the believing community today, but that would not be true. Its sober and depressing recital of a downward spiral of rebellion, retribution, repentance, and rescue confronts us with a hard look at ourselves (Michael Wilcock, *Judges*, p.29). We could skip over this part of the story if it were not for the fact that we too are so deeply influenced by the gods of this culture, such as money, sex and power (to name just three gods in the American pantheon). As a culture, we bow before the goddess of success even as Israel bowed to Baal. They had their images, we have our obsession with image. They paid homage to their fertility cults, we indulge our sensual selves with sexual immorality. Child sacrifice was part of their culture, abortion is part of ours. They gave away their sons and daughters in marriage to nice pagans and so do we.

Unlike the Israelites, Christians have not been given a mandate to go out and destroy the idols of our culture, but we have been commanded not to set them up in our lives. As the apostle Paul said so clearly, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:11-14). Our calling focuses on ministry, not condemnation; salvation, not capitulation; redemption, not rejection. Our mandate is to share the good news of Jesus Christ not participate in the bad news of evil. We are meant to be “salt and light,” not “sugar and spice.”

As much as we might not like to admit it there is a convicting and undeniable connection between Israel’s experience during the time of the judges and our own day. One line captures the spirit of the age and relates to our own, “everyone did as he saw fit” (17:6; 21:25). Or, as another version states, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (KJV). Self-centered, authority-resistant individualism, with its spirit of self indulgence and easy tolerance of evil, was the order of the day both then and now. While it may be easy to turn away from the message of Judges, it is important for us to take it to heart, for as the saying goes, “those who refuse to learn from history are condemned to repeat it.” The pattern of apostasy, oppression, supplication and deliverance, may go by different names (Arthur E.Cundall, *Judges and Ruth*, p.67, 70), but the disheartening downward cycle of disobedience and deterioration was not designed to defeat us and discourage us but to warn us. As the author of Hebrews said, “We must pay more attention...to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away” (Heb 2:1).

Although one might study Judges episode by episode and look at each of the twelve judges in chronological order, our purpose is to understand the impact of the story as a whole. To do this we will examine the pattern found in Judges of rebellion, retribution, repentance and rescue. This is a story about desperate people, some of whom were despicable. Their shocking stories recount cases of extreme depravity. But it is also a story of deliverance. The human condition merited destruction, but the mercy of Yahweh intervened bringing deliverance. The Judge behind the judges is the real story. Apart from the Spirit of God working on Israel's behalf and ours, God's salvation story would have ended right then and there.

## **Rebellion**

If we picked one descriptive line to summarize Israel's spiritual condition from the conquest to the monarchy, spanning close to two hundred years, it would be the words, "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord..." (2:11; 3:7,12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). Repeated seven times for emphasis, it became the singular fact that defined the era. The Bible does not belabor the explanation of Israel's evil. God-forsaking idolatry and God-compromising marriages sum it up. All the carefully laid out directions for worship, social justice, sexuality, and family life appear to have been laid aside for the sake of convenience and compatibility with the surrounding cultures. Why was the simple path of heart righteousness so hard to follow? What did the grandchildren of the Exodus find so enticing about Baal? How did the Canaanite fertility cults become so compelling? A practical explanation is concisely given, "After the 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..." (2:10-11).

Evil competed with God, defying logic, captivating the heart, and snaring the will. The allure of evil is an old problem, presented to us as a pleasing, fulfilling attraction that will make us wiser and happier (Gen 3:6). But the apostle John saw through evil's charade: "For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the person who does the will of God lives forever" (1 Jn 2:16-17).

In the book of Judges evil is neither explained nor excused. It is exhibited, and at times, in gruesome detail. Against a backdrop of popular idolatry and sexual license, violence emerges as evil's prominent feature. Judges interrupts the reoccurring pattern of rebellion, retribution, repentance, and rescue, in order to

expose the violence of Abimelech, Gideon's son through his non-Israelite slave girl (concubine) from Shechem. Abimelech's story is a slice of Israel's history that demonstrates just how far Israel had fallen away from the will of God. Using his connections with his mother's side of the family, Abimelech convinced the citizens of Shechem, who were Canaanites, to hire assassins to kill his seventy half-brothers, so he could be their leader. Shechem was located in the vicinity of Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, a place of great historical importance for the Israelites because it was on these mountains that they recited the blessings and curses of the Law of God. Throughout the narrative Gideon's name was changed to Jerub-Baal and any connection to Israel's God was nearly erased. The citizens of Shechem "gathered beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem to crown Abimelech king" (9:6). It is more than likely that this was the very site where Joshua set up the large stone as a witness to Israel's covenant with the Lord God (Josh 24:7). But in just three to four generations, that historic occasion of covenant renewal appears to have been totally forgotten. Under the oak of Shechem where Joshua once stood, Gideon's murderous son orchestrated his own Canaanite coronation. The author of Judges chose to put the story of Abimelech at the center of his book to make an important point. He illustrated Israel's rebellion in vivid detail and with considerable irony.

After the massacre, Jotham, the only surviving son of Gideon, confronted his half brother and the people of Shechem from Mount Gerizim. He climbed up to a craggy perch and shouted, "Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you." From the very place where Israel had heard the blessings proclaimed, Jotham called for repentance and pronounced judgment. If the people of Shechem were convicted by Jotham's parable of the thornbush and his plea for truth and integrity, there was still time to appeal to God. "Listen to me, so that God may listen to you." But Jotham ended his message more with a curse than a blessing. "Let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you...and let fire come out from you, citizens of Shechem...and consume Abimelech!" (9:20). With that said, Jotham fled for his life. There was no repentance and his call for truth and integrity fell on deaf ears. But God honored Jotham's message and the rest of the Abimelech tale chronicles his falling out with the Shechemites and his violent death at the hands of a woman (9:52). God brought judgment to bear on Abimelech and the men of Shechem. Through it all, the Israelites understood that the God of truth and integrity was still their Judge and Deliverer. And even when no human judge was on the scene, God ruled and overruled. We read, "Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them" (9:56-57).

The downward spiral of evil intensifies as we move through Judges until Israel's rebellion against God becomes so perverse and pervasive that the distinctive character of the people appears lost forever. Canaanite culture had so permeated Israel's view of the world that even the judges, moved by the Spirit of the Lord, seem totally removed from Moses and Joshua.

Little, if anything, can be implied about the spiritual condition of the early judges, Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. In Deborah's case, however, her repeated reference to the Lord, the God of Israel, and her poetry of praise to the Lord recall the days of Joshua. Lines such as, "Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers! I will sing to the Lord, I will sing; I will make music to the Lord, the God of Israel," make us think of King David (5:3). Her song of victory concludes, "So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength" (5:31). The prophetess Deborah stands out as exception to an otherwise sorry lot of judges. Gideon and Samson may make great heroes in Sunday School but they are terrible role models for Christians. Even though the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were used mightily, their lives reflect the spirit of the times. In isolated instances they were heroes of the Faith, but the lasting impression of them is that they were ruled by the spirit of the age.

Israel's rebellion was so great that even God's handpicked judges are a study in evil. Gideon's story ends on a note of personal vengeance (8:18-21) and idolatry (8:27). He may have eloquently declined Israel's invitation to be their ruler, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you." But when he requested payment, he succumbed to greed, and to idolatry when he made the infamous golden ephod. He proudly placed his free-standing ornamental icon in his hometown as a shrine. Like Aaron's golden calf, Gideon's image may have been well-intentioned, but it was a clear violation of the second commandment and a sad indication of the controlling influence of Canaanite religion. The bottom line is disturbing, "All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family" (8:27).

Seven judges follow Gideon, but for five of them (Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon) nothing is said about their relationship with the Lord. We may know how many sons they had but we know nothing about their walk with God. Only Jephthah and Samson are described in any detail and their stories are as discouraging as they are shocking. The Spirit of the Lord came upon them, but their understanding of the Lord appears terribly confused and tragically influenced by the spirit of the times. Jephthah credited the Lord with Israel's survival and turned to the Lord for Israel's victory (11:21-27), but he is better remembered for

killing his daughter, than for keeping his word. He took the name of the Lord in vain when he boastfully vowed, “Whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering” (11:31). When he returned victorious, “who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines!” (11:34). “Oh! My daughter!” exclaimed Jephthah, “You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break” (11:35). The sincerity of his daughter is heartbreaking and a revelation of how twisted the meaning of faithfulness to God had become. “My father,” she replied, “you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised...” And after two months of roaming in the hills and weeping with her friends, Jephthah “did to her as he had vowed” (11:36-39). I believe the author of Judges purposefully referred to Caleb and his daughter, Acsah, in the first chapter, so the reader could see in a very personal way how far Israel had fallen. Caleb’s daughter was offered her inheritance, but Jephthah’s daughter was offered as a burnt offering. The reader should not be deceived into thinking that there was any merit in Jephthah keeping his word to the Lord. It would have been far better for him to have killed himself than to sacrifice his child in a rite which clearly violated the Word of God and epitomized the horror of Canaanite religion. If you ever have to choose between keeping your word or keeping God’s Word, I earnestly hope you will obey God. Israel’s rebellion was so great that they did exactly what the Canaanites did, with the added blasphemy of doing it in the name of the Lord.

If it is true that people get the leaders they deserve, then in Samson’s day, Israel must have reached an all time low! The people had become superstitious, compromising, and apparently oblivious to God’s salvation history. The only distinction between Israel and the Philistines was ritualistic; Israel practiced circumcision and the Philistines didn’t (15:18). From spirituality to sexuality Israel seemed intent on copying the Philistines while maintaining only a few external religious distinctives. The God of Moses and Joshua had been forgotten and what remained was a religious tradition emptied of all meaning.

The Samson saga brings this tragic tale of Israelite rebellion to a climax but not a conclusion. Just when you think it couldn’t get worse we learn about Micah the idol maker, and a couple of Levites who would have been better at witchcraft than soulcraft. Anarchy and apostasy came together so completely in this era that the name of God on the lips of his people is offensive. Micah’s story (not to be confused with the eighth century BC prophet Micah) begins when he overheard his mother cursing the person who stole her 28 pounds of silver. The curse must have prompted Micah to confess his thievery to his mother, who responded, “The Lord bless you, my son!” If you are inclined to think that her “blessing” is a

noteworthy sign of grace, think again. She quickly gave the silver back to Micah. “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.” The writer meant to mock Micah and his mother. When everyone does his or her own thing it produces this kind of weird spiritual garbage. Having made an idol, Micah now needed a priest, so he hired a young homeless Levite from Bethlehem to be his “father” and “priest” (17:10). His twisted mind thought that he had guaranteed God’s blessing, “Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest” (17:13). But when six hundred armed Danites stole his idols and Levite priest, he was powerless to do anything. If Micah did what was right in his own eyes, so did the Danites. It was a dog-eat-dog, king of the jungle, survival of the fittest world, and Micah lost. Any talk of the Lord’s blessing was empty talk.

The second Levite story is worse than the first. We meet another displaced, under-employed Levite who had a slave girl from Bethlehem. She ran away and returned to her father, but the Levite pursued her and persuaded her to return with him. While in the company of her father the Levite enjoyed gracious hospitality but on the way home they stopped in Gibeah, a town of the Benjamites. The Levite had scrupulously avoided stopping at the Canaanite town of Jebus. He responded to his servant’s suggestion sanctimoniously, “No. We won’t go into an alien city, whose people are not Israelites. We will go to Gibeah.” But the Benjamites proved unfriendly and the Levite was left begging for a place to stay. An old man opened his home to the stranger and his party, more out of fear for what might happen to them if they spent the night in the town square, than for the sake of hospitality. In a scene reminiscent of Sodom (Gen 19), some of the wicked men of the city pounded on the old man’s door, shouting, “Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him” (19:22). To save his own life and get a good night’s sleep, the Levite gave up his concubine to the men. They abused and raped her throughout the night and in the morning the Levite found her on the threshold. As far as the author of Judges was concerned the Levite was no better than the wicked men of Gibeah. In the morning the Levite stepped over the body of his concubine, whom he had sacrificed to save himself, brusquely ordering, “Get up; let’s go.” He said this before he realized she was dead.

The reason we are told this shocking story now emerges. The Levite sparked a major civil war between the Benjamites and the rest of Israel when he cut up his concubine’s dead body into twelve pieces and sent them to all the areas of Israel (19:29). Confronted by the atrocity at Gibeah, Israel rose up against the Benjamites who refused to give up the wicked men of Gibeah. The resulting war nearly obliterated the tribe of Benjamin. Only six hundred men survived by escaping into the desert. While Israel seemed unwilling and unable to wipe out the

Canaanites, they called on the Lord to help them destroy the Benjamites. Whereas they intermarried freely with the pagan inhabitants, they took a solemn vow not to give their daughters in marriage to a Benjamite (21:1). Later, they regretted their extreme measures, but instead of going back on their vow they decided to attack Jabesh Gilead, the one Israelite city that had not sent any representatives to the solemn assembly at Bethel. They killed everyone except four hundred virgins, who were then given as wives to the Benjamites. If all of this sounds horrific, barbaric and absurdly cruel, you have grasped the author's message.

The whole point of the epilogue is that Israel is as bad if not worse than her pagan neighbors. She has beat them at their own game of sorcery, sensuality, cruelty, and blasphemy. The Canaanites knew more about living in peace and showing hospitality than the Israelites did (18:7,27). God's name was repeatedly invoked, but never honored. The Lord's treasured possession was trashed and his holy nation was reduced to a case study in depravity. The set apart, set above, people of God deserved to be cut-off.

### **Retribution**

The major story of the book of Judges is Israel's rebellion. The other three dimensions of the cycle, retribution, repentance, and rescue, while important, can be explored more briefly. To see the book as a whole is to witness the escalation of God's judgment. In the first cycle of apostasy, oppression, supplication and deliverance, God used an army from Northwest Mesopotamia to punish Israel for its idolatry. A one line explanation is given: "The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Nahraim" (3:8). The enemy came from the distant north and after eight years of oppression God raised up Othniel, son of Caleb, from the tribe of Judah in the extreme south. This may be a positive indication of the solidarity of Israel at the beginning, but which eventually broke down.

In the second round of oppression, which lasted eighteen years, God used Eglon, king of Moab, as his instrument of judgment. Eglon convinced the local inhabitants, the Ammonites and the Amalekites, to join forces with him in ruling over the Israelites. Next came the Philistines, then the Canaanites, followed by the Midianites, each in their turn unwittingly carrying out God's judgment against his people. The Midianites sound the worst. They drove the Israelites to seek shelter in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds (6:2). They devastated the land and impoverished Israel for seven long years.

It is a tragic irony that as Israel bowed to the gods of the Ammonites and the

Philistines, the Lord God empowered these very same nations to shatter and crush Israel (10:8). The last major period of oppression was the longest and lasted for forty years (13:1). It was long enough for a whole generation to know virtually nothing but Philistine domination. Over a span of four generations, Israel suffered oppression from virtually all the surrounding nations. They came from all directions. In the end, however, Israel turned on itself, and the Israelites killed one another. Jephthah's forces killed forty-two thousand from the tribe of Ephraim, because they opposed him (12:6), and we have already commented on the near destruction of the tribe of Benjamin (20).

The very God who had set them apart for his holy purpose gave them up because of their sinful ways. What the apostle Paul wrote in Romans is consistent with what happened in Judges. What was true then is true today. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness...For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened...Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen" (Rom 1:18,21,24,25).

The divine strategy of retribution in Judges is not foreign to God's strategy today. There is tremendous security in God, but there is no security in evil. Christians who compromise their spirituality and ethics to fit in with the world will find their marriages, families, livelihood, health and peace of mind subject to the forces of this world. We cannot bow to the idols of this world without falling under evil's domination. The pull of the world is strong, and even with the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit available to the believer, the potential to drift away (Heb 2:1) or fall away (Heb 5:6) must be perceived as real. The letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation come from the same Lord God who judged Israel. The words, "Repent! Wake up!" apply to us as well. God will not tolerate indifference, false teaching, and moral and spiritual compromise. "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline," said the Lord Jesus. "So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:19-20). God's readiness to hear Israel's repentance and our own leads us to the third element in the cycle.

## **Repentance**

The description of Israel's rebellion and the account of God's retribution is

complex, sobering, and even depressing. By contrast, the record of Israel's repentance is easy and simple, and very disappointing. There doesn't appear to be much depth or conviction in their confession. Repentance, if we can call it that, meant more a cry of desperation than a passion to obey God. There was great remorse over their condition, but little sorrow for their sin. The great scenes of covenant renewal, when the Law of God was proclaimed and affirmed, were now in the distant past. There may have been much regret for the misery suffered, but little repentance for the sin that caused their misery. A simple line moves the narrative from retribution to rescue, "when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer" (3:9,15; 6:6). But we wonder what this actually meant in terms of devotion to God, moral integrity, and a commitment to holiness.

In spite of little evidence of genuine change, God came to Israel's rescue time and time again. After seven judges (Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola and Jair), God resisted their simple formula, arguing that they had cried for help many times before. "But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!" (10:13-14). This is the only place in Judges where the Israelites persisted in their confession. "We have sinned," they declared. "Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now." And it is the only time that they "got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord" (10:16). The oppression didn't end, however, until the Lord could no longer bear Israel's misery (10:16).

It is this last line that may help to explain God's mercy toward Israel even when Israel's cry of desperation was noticeably absent. God saw Israel's misery even when they refused to see it. Although the Lord delivered the Israelites into the hands of the Philistines because they "did evil in the eyes of the Lord," they had grown accustomed to Philistine rule. Instead of crying out against their oppressors they became complacent. Unlike the Midianites who ravaged the land, the Philistines seduced the Israelites into conforming to their lifestyle. Israel accommodated to the live-and-let-live Philistine policy of intermarriage, moral tolerance and religious syncretism. This explains why the men of Judah were so eager to turn in Samson, because they didn't want to disturb the status quo (15:11-13). Since the normal cycle of rebellion, retribution, and repentance was frustrated because of Israel's fraternal relations with the Philistines, God mercifully sought an occasion "to confront the Philistines" (14:4). The Lord God could no longer bear their complacency, just as he could no longer bear their misery.

Repentance is not a dominant theme in Judges, and as the story continues any thought of turning away from evil and turning to God seems completely foreign.

The downward spiral of evil bypasses repentance altogether as the people sink into the depths of personal autonomy, political anarchy, and pagan apostasy. It is important to note, however, that God's mercy, reflected in a whole series of spectacular rescues, was not based on Israel's spiritual recovery, but on God's redemptive plan and purpose. The Judge of judges is the Lord of lords and King of kings and he knows the end from the beginning. Deliverance is never based on the prognosis of human history, but on the mercy of God revealed throughout salvation history.

## **Rescue**

The author of Hebrews summarized salvation history with sound-bite sketches of the men and women of Faith. Beginning with Abel, he gives a line of explanation for each name mentioned. But the last person listed, with an explanation, is Rahab, "By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient" (Heb 11:31). He ended the list with these words, "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets..." (Heb 11:32). Even a one or two line summary of each of the judges would have been extremely helpful. How did these judges illustrate the life of faith in an age of extreme autonomy and apostasy? Their weaknesses are obvious and their sins are disheartening. We might wonder how they made it on the list at all when we consider Barak's refusal to fight without Deborah, Gideon's ephod, Jephthah's child sacrifice, and Samson's unbridled lust.

One of the themes that runs through the description of the judges is articulated clearly by the apostle Paul, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor 1:27-29). The apostle was not referring to the book of Judges, but to the body of Christ in Corinth. There is a parallel here between God's selection of "deliverers" during Israel's "dark ages", and the call of God in people's lives today. The Israelites could never claim that they saved themselves, and nor can we. God's hand was so powerful and deliberate that any notion of self-salvation would have to be dismissed outright. To bring this truth home God chose an unusual cast of judges to deliver his people by means of highly unconventional strategies.

We get a hint of what is up when we are introduced to Israel's second judge. "Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite" (3:15). The text literally reads

that Ehud was “restricted as to his right hand.” It is not saying that he was naturally left-handed, but that his right hand was incapacitated (Wilcock, p.41). Ehud was hardly the man anyone would have imagined capable of assassinating Eglon king of Moab with an eighteen inch double edged sword, but he did (3:16). Nor was Deborah, the prophetess, a likely candidate to inspire Israel to rise up against Jabin, a king of Canaan, and his commander Sisera, who led a force of nine hundred chariots. But when the battle is the Lord’s he can put a woman in charge. Deborah’s command to Barak not only summed up the conviction of her heart but gave credit where credit was due, “Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?” (4:14). The fact that God used another woman, Jael, to drive a tent peg through Sisera’s skull after he fell asleep, only confirms that God wanted Israel to know that he was responsible for subduing the Canaanites (4:23). Gideon’s troop reduction from 32,000 to 300 made the same point. As the Lord said to Gideon, this was done for one reason only, “that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her” (7:2). Jephthah, the son of a prostitute and the leader of a renegade band of outcasts, was empowered by God to deliver the very people who rejected him (11:1-29).

Just in case Israel had failed to comprehend the obvious truth that God was the Judge of the judges, Samson’s story concludes the picture of the twelve judges. It is difficult to find very much, if anything, in Samson's life which is commendable. In some respects he is a pathetic character, driven by selfish passions and powerful lusts. His one redeeming quality is that he reminds the Israelites of who the enemy is. We are told that the Lord "was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines" and Samson, in spite of himself, was the man to provoke this confrontation (14:4). It is hard to imagine that Salvation history had come to this: God preserving the distinctive character of his people through a judge who is consumed by lust.

Surely the testimony of God's people was at an all time low. In fact one wonders if Samson had any practical idea of the ten commandments or the celebration of the Passover. Did he have a clue about the faithfulness of Abraham or the meekness of Moses or the courage of Joshua? At nearly every point Samson is a disappointment, a spiritual disaster waiting to happen. He just doesn't get it. He was clueless, frustratingly slow, and inexcusably blind to the will and ways of God. Even God's powerful act of judgment against the Philistines at the end of his life was reduced in the mind of Samson to revenge for his eyes, which the Philistines had gouged out. He thought nothing of the reputation of Yahweh. Samson was still only thinking of himself and getting even with his enemies. He died never seeing the larger purpose and the true calling of his life.

Samson and Deborah may be polar opposites when it comes to comprehending the will of God, but along with the other judges, they knew that God alone was Israel's Deliverer. By faith they depended upon God against overwhelming odds. They proved the divine truth that says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Although the judges reflected the spirit of their evil age, they also pointed forward to Jesus Christ, who "gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (Gal 1:4). To say that the judges point forward to Jesus may sound like a positive spin on hopelessly tragic lives, but keep in mind that while the author of Judges told their stories in depressing detail, he emphasized their reliance upon the Lord for deliverance.

Like the judges during Israel's dark ages we may find ourselves "under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure." But may we say with the apostle Paul, "this [has] happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us..." (2 Cor 1:8-10).