

Confirmation 2020-21
Session 10 – Judges
November 15, 2020

Background Information

This week we are back in the Bible, and more specifically, the Old Testament. Before our diversion to cover Luther & the Reformation (Session 8) and Justification (Session 9), we had covered Genesis (Session 4), Exodus (Session 5), the Law (Session 6) and the Ten Commandments (Session 7).

As a little review, the Israelites, under the leadership of Moses, were saved from their slavery to the Egyptians, crossed the Red Sea and led into the Sinai Desert. That is where their apostasy, a fancy word for sinning, became a big problem. Frustrated with the leadership of Moses, the people sinned against God many times, and each time God punished them and they re-committed themselves, only to repeat that cycle over and over again.

In order to form the Israelites into a unique people devoted to the one God of their ancestors, God gave them the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments. And that is where we left them – committed to living godly lives devoted to God, but wandering in the desert for forty years as their punishment for their faithlessness. How did they do? Not very well.

As Israel moved from slavery to nomadic living, then to a culture of war, and then finally into kingdom-mindedness, its leadership also experienced great changes. Moses led them from the taskmaster's whip in Egypt into the desert. After the forty long years of wandering, God allowed the Israelites to cross the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land.

Though we didn't look at the book of Joshua, Joshua was the one Moses appointed to be his successor as leader of the Israelites and the one to take the people across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. Before

the entire nation of Israel crossed over, the Promised Land was divided up among the Twelve Tribes of Israel – remember, these are the descendants of twelve sons of Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. There is a map on page 2102 in the back of the LSB that lays out the inheritance of each tribe.

Joshua's order from the LORD was to cross over the Jordan River and trust God to take the land that was possessed by the Canaanites. God told them to purge the land of its inhabitants land because they were wicked people. Israel's mission was clear: They were not to be influenced by the Canaanites' wicked practices and the cultural systems that fostered and endorsed them.

Given that mission, let's talk about the misguided idea that Joshua and the Israelites were motivated by the act of killing a group of people. The conquest was more about ending the Canaanites' religious and cultural practices than ending their lives. The problem wasn't the people, but their idolatry. Israel's invasion was more about the dismantling of the community of which the Canaanites were a part of than ending their lives.

After Joshua's death, leadership of the Israelites dissolved in the patriarchal leadership of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Sometimes the leadership did what the LORD told them to do, but at other times the various tribes went their own way, sometimes moving farther away from faith in the God of their ancestors and closer to the gods of the Canaanites they were supposed to have wiped out.

For about a two-hundred year period, the Israelites lived under the guidance of judges established by God. And that's where it gets a little confusing: not all of the judges were excellent at leading. Some of the judges who were good at leading weren't liked by the people, which essentially stripped them of authority. To add to this chaos, sometimes in Judges we hear multiple voices guiding at once, or at least overlapping one another with contrary advice.

As if that wasn't enough, the Israelites weren't very good listeners. There was a seriously small chance of God's direction for the people finding its way through all those filters. It wouldn't get much better when the nation finally came under the rule of kings (Session 11), but at least then it was pretty clear who was in charge.

What you need to know

We live in a world of violence, which is both quite different and quite similar to life in ancient Israel. The biggest difference is stability. The Israelites were undergoing a lot of transition, most of which was difficult and unwelcome. Their history was marked by almost constant war and violence, and that definitely had an impact on their desire to have the judges to provide protection and power and leadership.

God gave the people judges, but that doesn't mean they were all good leaders. Many of them had redeeming qualities, but they were singularly focused. It made for bad leadership and even worse situations.

This is a deeply ambiguous section of the Bible. There will be no point in making it seem easier than it really was. God gave people of Israel what they wanted, even though it ended up not being the best for them. But God advocates for God's people then, now, and forever – even when they make mistake after mistake. And that's good news for us!

Listening to God and community is necessary for leadership and discernment. We will find points in this lesson where listening – or not – made all the difference. This can be a strong connection for us in helping make sense of this complicated part of the biblical narrative.

About the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)

The introduction to Judges is found beginning on page 402 in the LSB. Please read the article entitled “Background File,” “What's the Story?” and “What's the Message.” These articles can be found at the beginning

of every book of the Bible and are very helpful in getting a basic understanding of each book's content.

Into the Story

The Bible tells the story of twelve judges. About half of them had little impact and are called "minor judges." The others, whom we might label as "major judges" are Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. Of those six, really only Deborah, Gideon, and Samson are memorable.

Deborah – Read Judges 4:1-5:31 (just a girl)

Gideon – Read Judges 6:1-40 (a small man from a small tribe)

Samson – Read Judges 13:1-16:31 (a real superhero)

There is a pattern to each of these stories that begins, the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and so the LORD punished them. And then after the Israelites called out to the LORD, the LORD heard them and sent them a savior in the form of a judge.

Essay Questions

In 150 of your own words, briefly answer one of the following questions below:

1. In Judges 4:1-16, we learn that one of God's most clever judges was a woman by the name of Deborah. What did Deborah do that would make her a great judge?
2. These days, we are used to seeing women in leadership positions. But during the time of the Judges, it was less common. In fact, out of the twelve judges mentioned, Deborah was the only woman. What made her an effective leader?

In 150 of your own words, briefly answer one of the following questions below:

3. In Judges 6:36-40, Gideon lays out a fleece. "Laying out a fleece" is not a very common expression but it is used from time to time and it comes from this passage. What does "laying out a fleece" mean?
4. In Judges 8:22-35, Gideon made an ephod, a kind of liturgical garment worn by a priest. What did he do with it? What did the Israelites do with it? What happened to the Israelites as a result of what they did? What can we learn from this?

In 150 of your own words, briefly answer one of the following questions below:

5. In Judges 15:14-20, Samson gained quite a reputation as a powerful man. His story, beginning to end, is magical and brutal at the same time. And yet at the end of this passage he was rewarded by judging Israel for 20 years. What do you think is going on here?
6. God's Judges were not perfect people, but they still were called by God. They didn't have all the answers or always make the wise choices, but God still wanted the Judges to use their God-given gifts to help others. In your opinion, what would have been the most important characteristic or spiritual gift to be an effective Judge?

Email your answers back to Pastor Jesse by email at pastor@zionohio.org no later than next Sunday, November 22.