

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

C. The Kingdom of Israel

7. Rise of the Monarchy

The next stage in our overview of the redemptive-historical story of the Old Testament deals with the Kingdom of Israel, first of all the rise of the monarchy, which was prompted by years of turmoil following Joshua's death. There had been a measure of unity among the tribes under the leadership of Moses and Joshua. But after them, with temporary exceptions, Israel's leaders were unable to unify in their God-given task of making their inheritance secure by completing the job of driving out their idolatrous neighbors.

God's people started off well enough. Judges begins with them asking the Lord which tribe should take the lead in fighting the Canaanites. *The Lord answered, "Judah shall go up."* Judah did just that, and had some success, although they had trouble overcoming the Canaanites of the plains because of their iron chariots. We don't know exactly what the men of Judah might have done differently; after all, the iron chariots of their enemies were a great advance on the weapons Judah had. But, the main problem appears to have been a lack of will to fight on after Judah had conquered what they considered to be enough territory to sustain them. And there were similar problems with the other tribes.

- (V.21): *The Benjamites failed to dislodge the Jebusites...*
- (V.27): Manasseh did not drive out several groups of Canaanites.
- Nor did Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, or Dan (v.29-34).

The failure of the Israelites to drive out the nations as God had commanded, led to them making agreements and treaties with the Canaanites. And that resulted in faith compromises. In fact, the major theme of the book of Judges is Israel's failure through compromise. God rebuked his people for their disobedience (ch 2:1-3):

The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be [thorns] in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."

Most of these compromises took place after the death of the generation of Israelites who had personally experienced God's leading of them into their inheritance. Judges 2:10-15 says, *After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, 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 ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the LORD's anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.*

So, again, the tragic story of the book of Judges is this: failure through compromise, a failure for which God judged the people of Israel.

But he was not judging them in the sense of condemning them as he had the Canaanites. He was testing them, much as he had tested Israel in the wilderness, to see if they would repent and follow him again. Judges 2:21-22 puts it this way:

I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did." This theme is repeated in ch 3:4 – The nations were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses.

This time of testing in the period of the Judges lasted for about 300 years. Things were not as bad as they could have been, for God raised up a number of leaders during these years. Twelve judges are mentioned in the book of Judges. They had some success at rescuing the people from their Canaanite oppressors and calling the people back to the service of God and administering justice in the land. Still there were long years between judges and so these centuries were generally an unhappy time for Israel and for the demonstration of righteousness within the covenant community of Israel.

There is a repetition in Judges—a series of vicious cycles—that not only helps us understand what Israel went through, but also is informative about the ups and down of life within any community of faith. God's people mess up time and again by departing from wholehearted devotion to God. And we know what inevitably follows such sinful compromise. Sooner or later, sin brings its own evil reward: some kind of suffering.

Note that I'm not saying that all suffering is the result of sin, but rather that all sin, sooner or later, results in suffering. This suffering often causes people to turn to God again and cry out for help. And, of course, God responds to genuine prayer with help and salvation. Then, after a while it seems that people start taking God for granted again and neglecting him and again start making unacceptable and sinful compromises. SIN leads to SUFFERING, which should lead to repentant SUPPLICATION, which God answers with some sort of SALVATION. Six times this pattern is made explicit in the book of Judges.

Number One (Judges 3:7-11)

- (SIN) *The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.*
- (SUFFERING) *The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years.*
- (SUPPLICATION) *But when they cried out to the LORD....*
- (SALVATION) *he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them.... So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.*

Number Two (Judges 3:12-15)

- (SIN) *Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD,*
- (SUFFERING) *and because they did this evil the LORD gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel (for 18 years).*
- (SUPPLICATION) *Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD,*
- (SALVATION) *and he gave them a deliverer-Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite.*

Number Three (Judges 4:1-4)

- (SIN) *After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the LORD.*
- (SUFFERING) *So the LORD sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor.*
- (SUPPLICATION) *Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help.*
- (SALVATION) *Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. This period of peace lasted for forty years.*

Number Four (Judges 6-8)

- (SIN) *Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD,*
- (SUFFERING) *and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.*
- (SUPPLICATION) *Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.*
- This time God answered their prayers with SALVATION by the hand of Gideon. And Judg 8:28 concludes: *Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon's lifetime, the land enjoyed peace forty years.*

Number Five (Judges 8:33 – 12:7)

- (SIN) *No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side. They also failed to show kindness to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) for all the good things he had done for them.*
- (SUFFERING) *And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him, he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites*
- (SUPPLICATION) *Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."*
- (SALVATION) Jephthah came to the rescue and led Israel six years.

Number Six (Judges 13:1 – 16:31)

- (SIN) *Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD,*
- (SUFFERING) *so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.*
- In this cycle the SUPPLICATION is not explicit but only implied
- (SALVATION) Angel of Lord to Samson's mother (13:5): *The boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.*" which we find out later, lasted twenty years.

Throughout this time none of Israel's judges established dynasties. Gideon had the best chance but he wouldn't do it (8:22-23). *The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us-you, your son and your grandson-because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian." But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you."*

Gideon understood that Israel had been set up not as a monarchy, but as a theocracy—a nation under the direct rule of God. Tragically, after Gideon died, one of his sons murdered his 70 brothers in an attempt to assume the power that had been offered to his father.

All in all, Israel just didn't do well at passing the Lord's tests. At the best times they still remembered that they were God's people and that they were supposed to be serving him. And, I'm sure that even in the worst of times there were always some faithful people of God. In fact the book of Ruth speaks of the covenant-keeping actions of two people in the time of the judges – and tells what their faithfulness meant to a woman named Naomi. She had temporarily left the Promised Land with her husband and two sons, but after their deaths returned feeling empty and hopeless.

One of the faithful people who helped Naomi was Boaz, an Israelite willing to risk his own future for the sake of caring for the down and out of his world. The other was Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth, a newcomer to the worship of Yahweh from the country and religion of Moab, who accompanied Naomi back to Israel despite her lack of prospects there. Both Boaz and Ruth conducted themselves just as God wanted his people to do, and as a result of the son born to them, Naomi regained her inheritance in Israel and was brought, as she described it, from emptiness to fullness. This fullness would eventually bless the entire nation through the grandson of this child: David.

The story of Boaz and Ruth, however, appears to have been somewhat unusual for the period of the Judges. The last verse of the book of Judges summarizes the whole period like this: *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.* Despite their unfaithfulness, however, God was persevering with his people to maintain the promise he had first made to Abraham. He was determined to see this project through to the end.

God's next steps are recounted in 1 Samuel. As the name of the book indicates, Samuel is a central character in this story. He was the last – and probably best – judge of Israel. Samuel was different right from the start. To begin with, he was born to a special woman. Hannah, who had been barren for many years – considered to be a tragedy in Israel where barren women were considered to be cursed.

In her desperation Hannah vowed to the Lord that if he would bless her with a son, she would surrender him into the Lord's service. Shortly afterwards, she was enabled to conceive, and nine months later Samuel was born. How happy Hannah was, but she didn't forget her vow to dedicate him to the Lord. So after Samuel was weaned (probably at age 3-4), she took him to Shiloh to live with and be trained by Eli the priest.

Conditions in Eli's home were not the best, however. Actually what happened there was typical of what was happening at large in Israel—with everyone doing his own thing. Eli's sons, who were also priests, didn't even let the people sacrifice properly, but confiscated the "fat" of the offerings for themselves. In biblical terms, the fat was the best portion and reserved for God alone. For this offense and others, God sent a prophet to Eli to announce judgment on his house (2:30-33).

But even in this atmosphere, God was with Samuel, and already early on spoke to him and through him. 1 Samuel 3:19-20 puts it this way: *The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.*

Samuel's judgeship was accompanied by a degree of relief from Philistine oppression. But later on Israel grew concerned for what would happen when Samuel was gone. He appointed his sons as Israel's leaders, but they had turned out rather like Eli's sons, accepting bribes and perverting justice. So the elders of Israel asked Samuel to appoint a king to lead them.

That request for a king was understandable. All of the surrounding nations had kings. And the elders thought that it would solve Israel's many problems and make things wonderfully easier, if only Samuel's successor could be a human and visible king such as the neighboring peoples had. But that was not what God had had in mind for his people. God had wanted a theocracy—direct rule by himself. He Himself was Israel's King invisible.

Samuel knew this and was angered by the request of Israel's elders. But God told him not to take the rejection personally. He also told Samuel to warn Israel how much the king would demand of them: things such as heavy taxes, forced labor, and military service.

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles." (1 Sam. 8:18). So God gave in and led Samuel to anoint Saul as Israel's king. Saul was an impressive man physically. And he started off at least, as an apparently God-fearing and humble man. Unfortunately, it didn't take him long before he demonstrated his unwillingness to follow God's instructions.

The occasion was a threat from a large force of Philistines, who had much of Israel's army hiding in fear and others even deserting. Saul had been told to wait for Samuel to offer the pre-battle sacrifices, but after seven days of waiting the king took it upon himself to do what only the priests were authorized to do. Shortly afterwards Samuel showed up and severely rebuked Saul, telling him that for his disobedience his kingship would not endure.

Some time later, Israel was in a battle with the Amalekites, and Saul disobeyed the Lord again—this time in his failure to totally destroy this nation and all their possessions. God was putting them under the ban of final judgment for the ambush they had set against the Israelites as they made their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. After that battle Moses had spoken this word from the Lord (Ex. 17:16): *"Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the LORD, the LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."* Samuel told Saul what his disobedience meant: *"You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!"* (1 Sam. 15:26). It was the last time Samuel would ever go to see Saul. Soon after, the prophet anointed David as Saul's successor.

From this time on Saul deteriorated spiritually, his low point coming the day before his death when he resorted to a pagan practice that he himself had previously outlawed—going to a spiritual medium to consult with spirits of the dead. The next day Israel's army was defeated by the Philistines, and Saul and his three sons died in the battle, Saul by suicide. Before this end, however, Saul's decline was associated with the story of the rise of David, who would succeed him to the throne.

To this point the Lord's negative predictions about the appointment of a king for Israel were confirmed. Nevertheless, God would raise up a king who had a heart for him and his purposes—David. And although even David would have his significant failures, God would keep covenant with David's line and make sure of an eventual successor who would live, die, and be raised again to be the perfect king for the spiritual offspring of Abraham.