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What's the Point....of Judges?

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The book of Judges describes an unusual, and sometimes troubling, era in Israel. During this long era, Israel lived without kings nor other earthly rulers, which led to some strange days indeed. During this frequently chaotic period, we nevertheless see encouraging stories of how God delivers and protects his people when they acknowledge him and their need for him.

Overview Of Judges & Overall Thoughts

The book of Judges describes a unique time in Israel's history, when they were no under direct control of a foreign nation, and also had no central government of their own. On the positive side, this allowed people to seek and follow God for his own sake, rather than just following human authorities. Yet at the same time it also brings out some unpleasant aspects of human nature.

The book opens by telling us about Joshua's death, the obstacles that the Israelites faced in occupying Canaan, and a recurring cycle that begins, showing us the contrast between human nature and God (Judges 1-2). After a time of faithfulness, they are drawn to one or more of the Canaanite idols (or to the earthly things they hoped to obtain by serving them), their hearts become hardened, so God gives them over to the hands of one of the neighboring tribes.

When they finally realize their vulnerability and their need for God, the Lord gives them a 'judge' or 'leader' (the Hebrew word describes a recognized or trusted leader, guide, or adviser). So for a time, things would go well; yet sooner or later their hearts wander again, repeating the cycle. Likewise, we too may have our own cycles in our relationship with our Heavenly Father.

The times of the 'judges' then continue for many generations (Judges 3-16). When Deborah was Israel's 'judge,' she called upon Barak to deliver the land from a Canaanite army, with Barak requesting Deborah's presence at the battle to give him reassurance. Similarly, Gideon is quite timid when God calls him to lead the Israelites, repeatedly asking God for reassurance.

Other 'judges' were rash like Jephthah, or even brutish like Samson, who in the end needed to be humbled before he could finally deliver Israel from the Philistines. Yet the book of Hebrews tells us that God turned their weaknesses into strength (Hebrews 11:32-34); for this is one of the lessons from the book of Judges. God simply asks us to give him our mustard seed of faith.

Yet Judges closes with a series of remarkably unpleasant events (Judges 17-21). These events go from bad to worse to even more distressing; and in these chapters the writer laconically remarks several times that "in those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit", for this section is full of misdeeds, problems being handled with dreadful measures, and more.

All of this shows us human nature and human weakness, and our need for God every moment. One bad decision can lead to others, one offense can easily provoke other offenses, good intentions can become easily distorted, and human nature cannot stop these vicious circles. Yet, Jesus has delivered us from spiritual death, and God guides us and gives us his Spirit to live within us.

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What's the Point....of Judges? Caleb Dillinger

If there was one book of the Bible that would be guaranteed rated R or TV MA, it's the book of Judges. War, oppression, murder, graphic violence, nudity, prostitution, strong language. Throw in conspiracy theories, miracles, and a weird marriage plot after near tribal extinction - you've got all the ingredients for binge reading/watching material.

There are 21 chapters in the book of Judges, and nearly the entire book is told through a repeating cycle: Israel has faithful leaders and is faithful to God - leader dies and the people sin - God oppresses Israel by letting them be overtaken by enemies - People cry out to God for help - God raises faithful leader and saves Israel - Israel has new leader and is faithful to God.

Then the cycle repeats. Again, and again, and again. Have you ever watched TV shows like that? Season 1 the good guys have to overcome the odds and beat the bad guys. Season 2 they do it again on a bigger scale. Season 3 they once again overcome odds and beat the bad guys. The details are different, the cycle is the same. It's an honest reflection of life, and this book of Judges is an honest reflection of humanity and sin.

There is a reason Israel sinned so much. The final verse serves as a chilling reminder of life that leads to sin: "Everyone did what was right in their own eyes." (Judges 21:25)

The emphasis is clear: if you look to yourself for wisdom, righteousness and truth, you'll get stuck in sin. If you look to God, you will find hope and deliverance.

God teaches this lesson in several ways through the history of Israel's judges. Wanna know an outlandish story about how God saved Israel by killing an evil king who was so fat his stomach swallowed the sword and then he died in a puddle of poop? Read Judges 3 and the tale of Ehud. Wanna know about how a woman drove a tent peg into an enemy's head while he napped and saved Israel? Read Judges 4. Wanna read about how God took an Israelite army of 32,000 people and reduced it to 300 before terrifying the bad guys with trumpets? Read Judges 7. Wanna read about Samson and his super strength so long as he had long hair? Read Judges 13-16. After Samson, things take a weird turn and Israel's story turned to idols and prostitutes and violence. Judges ends sad - which is how every story ends when God is removed from the leadership role.

What's the point of reading Judges? I hope it's already made clear. God must be our leader. God must be our savior. When humans try to do it alone, we sin and fail. When humans make their own decisions after God does amazing things, they fail (see Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah in particular). Doing things your own way sounds promising until you get covered in sin and problems. Following God doesn't make things easy, but it keeps you out of all the crazy drama that sin is sure to bring along.

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I don't suggest reading Judges to your five year old kids. They aren't the target audience. Grown adults are. You are. History teaches the lesson: follow self, and sin follows. Follow God, and righteousness follows. That's the point of reading Judges.