

I will tell you about a critical period in the history of Israel. This period lasted more than three hundred years, but most modern Christians know little about it, and some of what they think they know is wrong.

You know who I blame for this lack of knowledge in Christians of today? The New Testament writers, including me.

New Testament writers talk a lot about Abraham, Moses, the kings and prophets, so Christians know those types of Old Testament things are important.

However, one period of time in Jewish history that we New Testament writers almost never acknowledge is the time of the judges, the time period of the Old Testament book of *Judges* and the prophet Samuel. This period lasts from the death of Joshua in about 1390 BC to when Saul becomes Israel's first king about 1050 BC.

The Israelites originated from the sons of Jacob, who was renamed Israel. Each of his twelve sons had a tribe made up of their own descendants. His favored son, Joseph's tribe was split between *his* two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. So, there were eleven full tribes and two half-tribes of Israel, commonly called the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

God promised to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson, Israel. So, Canaan became known as The Promised Land.

Interestingly, the sons of Israel originally lived in Canaan, but because of a severe famine had to relocate to Egypt. The original family of seventy thrived there, and their descendants existed in Egypt for a total of about four hundred years, swelling to a nation of more than 2 million people. However, the Israelites ended up as slaves to the Egyptians. They escaped Egypt under the leadership of Moses, and wandered in the desert for forty years. After that, the now numerous

Israelites finally entered Canaan and conquered most of it under the leadership of Joshua.

Under Joshua, the land of Canaan was distributed to each of the twelve tribes, except the tribe of Levi, who were priests. When Joshua died, God did not appoint a successor to him.

At that point in time, the leadership structure looked like this: each tribe had tribal elders who made the decisions and judgements for that specific tribe. The tribes were independent of one another, but they were supposed to work together when needed since they were tribes of one nation.

God had authority over all of the tribes. They were to worship him, and him only, at the Tabernacle located in Shiloh under the direction of the priests. As long as the Israelites were faithful to God, he would make sure they prospered.

Simple, huh? And this leadership structure was enough because of some special provisions of God. First, there were *no* huge empires nearby to contend with. They did not have to contend with Egypt, Assyria, Babylon...none of those.

Second, there *were* local enemies to contend with across the borders, and a few stragglers inside the borders. These enemies were strong enough to provide "exercise," but weak enough that the tribes could easily contend with them under the protection of God.

In summary, when Joshua died, God had positioned the Israelites in the perfect place with perfect conditions to have a perfect theocracy. A nation led by the One True God. Peace and prosperity *forever* were within their grasp. No other people has had that opportunity, before or since.

To the west was the Mediterranean Sea. To the east and south was desert. To the north were mountains that provided protection from invasion. Lasting peace and prosperity within their grasp. All they had to do were two things. First, they had to finish conquering Canaan. There were a few remnant peoples and areas that needed to be vanquished. This would accomplish the important goals of securing their borders and keeping out the cultural influences of those people that were always a detriment to the Israelites commitment to God. Since God said he would

continue leading them, it would have been relatively simple for the Israelites to finish the task of completely conquering Canaan.

The second thing they had to do was to fulfill their side of the deal they had made with God...they had to follow the laws given to Moses. By staying isolated from other people groups, it was actually very much easier to follow God's laws, very much easier not to fall into the trap of worshiping other gods.

Finish conquering Canaan and follow the Laws of Moses, the future of the Israelites hangs in the balance. Will the Israelites choose to follow through on their end of the deal and achieve perfect prosperity and protection...forever?

The book of Judges is about God giving them more than three hundred years and numerous do-overs to accomplish those two things.

As you read the book of *Judges*, don't be misled by the rather odd stories and people. The book is filled with the failures of the Israelites to completely conquer Canaan or follow the laws of God.

When you read about a Canaanite or Amonite person, you can assume those people exist because the Israelites did not conquer the land and vanquish the people as God commanded.

When you read about the Philistines, you can assume those people live in Canaan because the Israelites failed to secure its borders all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, and so the Philistines lived on the coast. Once the Philistines entrenched themselves, the Israelites could not dislodge them.

With mention of a Canaanite or Philistine woman, you can predict the story will likely involve an Israelite man hoping for a sexual relationship with her...against the laws of God. In the process, that man is likely to get involved in worshiping or allowing the worship of false gods.

You can't help but be encouraged when you first start reading *Judges*. The Israelites seem anxious to conquer the land. They ask who gets to go first to fight the Canaanites. The Lord says it is to be the tribe of Judah. They ask the tribe of Simeon to join them. Wise move. In return, Judah will help Simeon fight the enemies they need to dislodge.

Judah attacks the Canaanites and Perizzites and routs them completely. They kill ten thousand men in the first fight. They capture their leader, but they do not kill him as they were instructed. They cut off his thumbs and big toes...but do not kill him.

Judah defeats Jerusalem. Judah pursues the Canaanites in the hill country, the Negev and western foothills, and Hebron. Nothing can stand in their way.

Caleb offers his daughter in marriage to the man who conquers Kiriath Sepher. His nephew, Othniel, conquers that city and wins the hand of Caleb's daughter.

A small crack in their admirable obedience appears when the descendants of Moses's father-in-law, the Kenites, go to live with the tribe of Judah in the Negev.

In fulfillment of their agreement, the people of Judah go with the Simeonites attack the Canaanites in Zephath, and destroy them.

Judah also takes the cities of Gaza, Ashkeon and Ekron, along with their territories. Judah has conquered its land almost all the way to the Mediterranean coast.

Complete victory is within their grasp. But they choose to snatch defeat instead.

Judah is unable to drive the people from the coastal plains Since it is not easy, Judah gives up and walks away. They decide God is not able to fulfill his promise to give them the entire land all the way to the Sea. They do not conquer the coastal plains.

The tribe of Benjamin is unable to dislodge the Jebusites from Jerusalem, so they leave them there. Another direct failure to follow God's command to completely conquer the country.

The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh spare the life of a spy, and he goes to the land of the Hittites and builds a city. They fail to dislodge people from city after city. Instead of seeking help from their fellow Israelites, they live with their failures.

On and on and on. Ephraim does not drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer. Neither does Zebulun nor Asher nor Naphtali. In total opposition to God's directives, the Israelites allow the Canaanites and Amorites to live among them.

Let me stop here. The Israelites have disobeyed God in the matter of not completely dominating Canaan and ridding themselves of outside cultural influences. The rest of the book of *Judges* will describe the disastrous outcomes of that failure.

In retrospect, it's easy to criticize the Israelites for their failure to rid themselves of outside influences...but...what if you were to apply that same critical thinking to yourself?

Any bad influences exist within the boundaries of your life? Too hard to rid yourself of them? Maybe you attempt to control those influences somewhat so they don't do *too* much damage to you. Or your family?

Good and evil don't co-exist well, the Israelites are solid proof of that. Snatching defeat from victory, a critical lesson for everyone in any time. So, in the event that you find some parallels to your own life, a fresh read through *Judges* may be just what you need.