

After the Israelites conquered the Promised Land, they were perfectly positioned to completely follow God and obey his commandments. If they had, they would have prospered forever, and brought other nations to worship God, too.

The book of *Judges* would not have been necessary. It would not need to be written. In fact, none of the books in the Old Testament after *Joshua* would have needed to be written.

The Lord gave the Israelites chance after chance to live faithfully to him, but they never would do it for very long. The book of *Judges* is about this sad cycle of events. Most of the Old Testament books after *Judges* are concerned with this same cycle of obedience, disobedience, and restoration.

Instead of God, the Israelites chose to follow other gods and to disobey the commandments of the one true God. Instead of prosperity, they received consequences, instead of bringing others to God, they left God. However, instead of allowing them to completely self-destruct, God chose not to completely abandon the Israelites.

God appointed people known as judges. The judges led the people back to God.

I want to tell you about the first four judges that God provided to the Israelites.

After the Israelites entered Canaan, they did not wipe out the peoples living there as God instructed them to. They lived among the “ites,” if you will ...the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They did not resist the temptation to intermarry with them, which led to the Israelites to worship their gods.

They forgot the true God, and chose to worship the Baals and the Asherahs. This angered God and he turned them over to the king of Aram Naharaim for eight,

long years of servitude. When they finally begged God for relief, he sent them a deliverer.

Othniel was the first judge. He was the nephew and son-in-law of Caleb, the spy. They owned land allotted to them during Joshua's conquest.

Othniel overpowered the king of Aram Naharaim, and the country had peace for forty years, until Othniel died. First cycle over.

As soon as Othniel died, the people started worshiping false gods. Again, God turned them over to a foreign king, this time, the king of Moab for eighteen years. When they begged God for relief, he sent the second judge, Ehud.

Ehud was of the tribe of Benjamin. A left-handed man. Since he was left-handed, he strapped his sword to his right thigh, under his clothing...an unexpected place.

The Israelites had to pay a regular tribute to the King of Moab. They sent this tribute by Ehud and some carriers. Ehud sent the carriers away, and returned to the king to give him a secret message. The king gave Ehud a private audience away from his assistants.

Ehud told the king he had a message from God, and when the king rose, Ehud took his sword and stabbed the king with it. The king was so fat it disappeared in his blubber. Ehud went out the widows and escaped. The king's assistants waited a while, but eventually discovered his dead body.

Ehud went to the tribe of Ephraim and summoned the other Israelites. They attacked Moab through the fords of the Jordan River. They were completely victorious, killing ten thousand Moabites, and taking Moab captive. The Israelites had peace for eighty years. Second cycle over.

On the coastal plains, the Philistines had taken control of land from the tribe of Judah. God sent Shamgar to deliver them. He killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad, a cattle prod. He saved Israel. Third cycle over.

After Ehud and Shamgar, the Israelites, once again worshiped false gods, so the Lord gave them over to the king of Canaan who resided in Hazor. Joshua had destroyed Hazor, but the king of Canaan rebuilt it.

The commander of the king's army was Sisera, who was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. He had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron, to which the Israelites had no defense. He was extremely cruel and ruled over the Israelites for twenty years. When the Israelites finally repented and turned back to the Lord, he sent the fourth judge.

I am that fourth judge. Deborah. I held court under the Palm of Deborah, in the hill country of Ephraim. All of the Israelites came to me to settle their disputes.

God spoke me, "Call Barak as commander of the Israelites." I told Barak that he was to lead ten thousand men against Sisera, and God would deliver Sisera and his chariots into Barak's hands at the Kishon River.

Barak's response was truly shocking. "If you go with me, I will go. If you don't go with me, I won't go."

As a prophet, I told him that I *would* go with him, but because of his response, a woman would get the glory for the destruction of Sisera. At the time, we both thought I meant that I would get the glory.

Barak and I took ten thousand men to Mount Tabor and waited. When Sisera heard about our defiance, he brought all of his chariots and men to fight us. When he arrived, Barak took his ten thousand men down the mountain. The Lord routed Sisera, and his chariots.

Now you are probably asking yourself how the Lord and Barak's men defeated the chariots, they were outfitted with iron, after all. Formidable and definitely gave the Canaanites the upper hand. The Bible only gives a few hints. Chariots were normally invincible on the plains where the horse could run freely, but they were not good in the mountains. They were also not good in another circumstance. Rain and mud. Chariots could get bogged down. You can see that may have happened in this case, because Sisera had to dismount from his chariot. You can also infer it from my victory song where I sang that the heavens poured and the

clouds poured down water.<sup>1</sup> God turned Sisera's invincible war machines and armor into death traps by a rainstorm and an overflowing river.

What happened to the cruel and powerful Sisera? He fled on foot and found shelter at the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Jael's husband and the King of Hazor had a treaty, so Sisera felt safe there. Sisera ordered her to hide him and to tell people he was not there.

Jael gave him warm milk to drink and hid him in a blanket. As soon as she heard him sleeping soundly, she drove a tent peg through his temple and into the ground. Jael, a woman, got the glory for killing Sisera, just as I had prophesied.

Under my direction, the Israelites overcame the Canaanites, and there was peace for forty years. End of cycle four.

You may be saying to yourself, "What is wrong with the Israelite people! Four times they turned away from God, and four times he delivered them from their unfaithfulness. Can't they just stay faithful to God and not put themselves through the pain?"

Try to see things from our point of view. We want to be in control our own lives. It is hard to trust in a God that you cannot see, especially when the rewards and consequences don't seem to be correlated with our actions. We are easily attracted to things that aren't good for us. We envy other people and the things they enjoy.

We want to be friends with everyone, have everyone like us. Our lives are drab, we want some excitement. The people around us seem to do what they want, they have more money and fun than we do. We want to be happy, and if worshiping other gods might get us there, we might risk worshiping other gods.

Oh dear, that may sound all too familiar! I'm referring of course, to my fellow-Israelites. You have the Books of Judges and these four cycles to learn from. My hope is that you do.

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<sup>1</sup> Judges 5:4