

JUDGES 1:1-3:6

Moses' last words to Israel before sending them on to conquer and find rest were these: "The Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: And all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee" (Deut 28:1-2). Under Joshua, the nation knew just such exaltation.

But after the death of Joshua's generation, a process of deterioration set in. Instead of the blessings promised, Israel began to experience defeat. Instead of possessing the land, they were pushed back by their neighbors. Instead of being feared, they were afraid.

Why? What happened to the blessing?

The Biblical record makes it clear. Israel neglected the one condition for blessing. Blessing was ordained only "if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments" (Deut 28:1, RSV). The years of darkness were directly related to Israel's neglect of that trust in God which frees man to obey. (From Larry Richards, *Years of Darkness, Days of Glory*, David Cook Publishing, Elgin, IL, 1977).

BACKGROUND NOTES

- Judges is a book of cycles, not strict chronology (note that chs. 16-21 precede chs. 3-15), demonstrating the results of the last verse, 21:25: "in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." The cycle described in the book is a fall into sin followed by crisis, rescue by a heroic leader or *judge*¹, and a period of peace. Twelve judges are recorded.
- Verse 21:25 also suggests that Judges was written during the monarchial period. According to 18:31, 20:27 and I Sam 4:3-11, it was written after the Ark was moved from Shiloh. It is traditionally ascribed to Samuel, though this is uncertain.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Short-answer questions:**
 - a) Read Heb 12:1-3, 11:32-34. Why should study Judges?
 - b) Why (from the text in Judges) does Israel keep getting into trouble?
 - c) What other ways could God have protected his people? Why did he use judges?
 - d) How do the judges represent God's faithfulness to his covenant with his people?
 - e) In what ways are the judge different from earlier leaders, such as Moses or Joshua?
2. **Kill thy neighbor:** Read John 17:16-19. We are called to be in the world but not of it. Read Ex 23:32. The Israelites of this time, however, were called to segregate themselves from the world, in order to remain untainted from it. Why the difference? Is there a place in modern Christianity for the cloistered life?
3. **Passing the baton:** Judges describes a long dark period of Israel's history. Repeatedly Israel wandered from Yahweh, because of a communication breakdown between generations (see 2:10-11).

¹ Hebrew *shophetim*, meaning judge, ruler, deliverer or savior.

Modern Christian parents face an additional difficulty: their children are raised in a postmodern, relativist culture in which truth is not assumed to be the same for one person as for someone else.

How do we go about sharing the gospel with children and young adults who start from a culture which lacks even the belief in absolute truth? How have you experienced the effects of relativism and postmodernism?

4. **Spare the rod:** God is described as taking an active hand in the discipline and punishment of Israel. This picture of God is seen on an individual level in Heb 12:4-8. Do you think that God actually makes bad things happen to us in order to teach or punish us, or does he just *use* bad things which would have happened to us anyway? Try to think of personal examples one way or the other.
5. **Foreshadowing:** In what ways, if any, do the judges prefigure Christ?