

## Introduction to Judges

### *Leader's reflection*

"In those days there was no King in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own sight." Judges 21:25

This is the last verse in the book of Judges, and it serves to place everything that has just been read into a context. There is chaos, society is broken, there is no community, no shared values, no shared belief. People do what they want, no matter the consequences, and no matter what they know of God.

Throughout the book there is a cycle that repeats itself.

- The people reject God;
- their rejection has consequences;
- the people realise their mistake and repent;
- God sends a judge who leads the people to freedom.

This cycle repeats itself over and over again throughout the book with the people moving to and from covenant faithfulness, depending on whether there is a judge around to keep them on track.

What is important to remember when reading this book is that the punishment that the Israelites receive is not due to the active work of God punishing them, but rather is a consequence of their behaviour.

It might be helpful to look at it like this:

- God gives them, in the Law, the best way to live as a society, a way that draws people together, that provides a safety net for those who are mistreated, and which helps people to hold onto their possessions and lands lightly. When we read the Law today we tend to gravitate towards the parts of it that don't make sense to us, but when viewed in their original setting and with their original purpose, the intention of the Law is clear.
- When people reject the Law, when they begin to mistreat those in society, when the familial and societal bonds are neglected and rejected, then the society crumbles and the country becomes weak. A weak country is a target, and so the countries in the surrounding area invade and take over the land.
- When the people are called back to the Law and to follow God, they are drawn back into a society that cares for those among it, that values family, and which allows all within the society to flourish. The society becomes strong again, and so the invaders leave because they no longer have easy pickings.

*So who are the Judges?*

The Judges were leaders raised up by God at specific times in the history of Israel before the time of the Kings. Their role was to save the Israelites from their enemies, and to preserve domestic society by reminding people of the call of God on their lives.

They were also to dispense justice impartially and fairly, protecting the widow, the orphan and the stranger (Deut 24:17) and not let themselves be influenced by popular opinion (Exod 25:2-3). It was this need to not be influenced by public opinion that allowed them to function in the way that they did, as they were not pulled along by the populace away from God, but held true to the call God had placed on them.

*Why it matters for us.*

The book of Judges is a strange, and at times disturbing book, but one that it is worth visiting and re-visiting. It helps us to see what can happen when a society becomes obsessed with selfish desires, but it also serves to remind us where the cycle of sin is present in our own lives, and how we need to constantly search out God in our lives, and try to live according to His plan for us.



## Gideon

Reading: Judges 6:11-16, 36-40; 7

### *Leader's reflection*

Gideon falls into a line of unlikely leaders that God calls forward to lead his people. He is the youngest member of the weakest clan in the land. According to the way things should have worked, he is the least likely man in the nation to be called to lead, and yet God calls him. Gideon himself is astounded by this, we see in 6:15, he outlines to the Angel (without realising that is whom he is addressing), why he couldn't possibly be the one who God is calling. And yet it is through him that God works to lead the people to freedom.

The first 10 verses of chapter 6 set the scene for Gideon perfectly, and we can see immediately where in the cycle of Judges we are. The people have done evil, they have rejected the way of God, and have been invaded. They are living in fear in the land that was promised to them, hiding in the desolate mountains, scraping a living. When the people entered the Land, it was described as a land of plenty, and yet here they are terrorised by invaders, unable to plant crops and reduced to subsistence living off the land. Gideon is as much a part of this as anyone else, when the Angel appears to him, he is threshing wheat in the wine vat so that he will not be discovered, and so that the Midianites will not take the wheat for themselves.

We have picture of a people scared to be seen, afraid of shadows, and not living in the freedom of the land which they were led into. These people are two generations removed from the people who were freed from Egypt, they have not seen God at work in magnificent and fantastical ways, they have never had to rely on Him for everything in the way that their grandparents had to. So Gideon's question in v13, asking why all this has happened, makes perfect sense. It isn't stubbornness, nor anger that makes him ask, merely an open curiosity about how these things can be happening.



And there is no answer, at least not a straight one. Instead he is told to, “Go...and deliver Israel from the power of Midian.” The implication is that this is the answer to Gideon’s question, the power of Midian, or rather the Israelites submission to the power of Midian is the reason this is all happening. Stop that, and we stop the pain, the suffering, the fear, and allow the people to live in the fullness of life that God has offered.

What follows is a rediscovery for the people of relying on God fully. An army put together from the tribes numbering 22,000 men. But this is too many; if they won they would be able to point to their own strength and bravery, and take the glory for themselves. Instead, God wants them to see that they are reliant on Him, to remind them of all that He has done for them, and to show that He is still active in the world to protect and to lead them. To do this the 22,000 are reduced to 300, before being told to take a torch and a trumpet each. They surround the Midianite camp, and at a signal, show their flaming torches, sound their trumpets, and shout loudly, “For Yahweh and for Gideon.”

When this happens the Midianites are thrown into confusion and, convinced they are under attack, turn on one another. The result of trusting in God is not a victory in battle, but a victory which should not have happened. Through this Israel learns to remember God’s way and to worship Him.

Temporarily at least.

***Aim***

To remember that God shows us the best way to live, and if we ignore Him we are turning away from that.

***Main points to cover***

1. The Israelites forgot God and turned their back on Him.
2. Because of this they were forced to live in fear.
3. God showed that they could rely on Him and that He would lead them to freedom.

***Focus On***

Gideon trusted in God, even though God’s plan didn’t make sense.



**Activity ideas**

Exploring the story: Split the story into two parts, the Call of Gideon, and the Victory over the Midianites. Starting with the Call, ask the young people to read through the story and pick out the points at which Gideon doubted what God was saying and doing. Why did Gideon doubt? Was he justified in doubting? The answer is yes he was. God's way didn't seem to make sense. He was calling the least powerful person from the least powerful tribe to lead the people, and then giving a way to defeat the Midianites that seemed absolutely stupid. But on both counts God's way proved to be the way to victory. Ask the young people if they can think of things in their faith, or things they have heard about God that don't seem to make sense. Why don't they make sense?

God's way is best. One of the reasons that we can sometimes reject God's way is that we quite like being in control of our own lives, we quite like the idea that we know the best way to live. Ask the young people if they can think of a time that they ignored what they knew was right, or did the wrong thing, on purpose. What were the consequences to them doing that? Ask them to think about how God's way might have been different for them. If you have an example from your own life, use this although we need to be careful we aren't trying to scare the young people into good behaviour, Remember that sometimes God's way looks like rebellion, but it is rebellion against the things of this world, and is showing commitment to a higher calling (remember the stories from Daniel?).

What does God's way look like? Show a list of ideas and values and ask the young people to place them in one of two lists - God's Way, and the World's Way. Once you have gone through ask the young people why they have placed them where they have, and if there are any others they would add to them.

**Deborah**  
**Reading: Judges 4:**

***Leader's reflection***

Deborah seems to stand out, not just in Judges, but in the Bible more widely, as a female leader in a world of men. However, despite our assumptions, unless it was specifically stated that a role had to be undertaken by a man, such as King or Priest, there was no barrier to women holding positions of leadership in the Israelite community.

We are introduced to Deborah in Judges 4, after first being reminded of the context; the people have done evil after the last judge died, and as a result are suffering under the rule of the Canaanites. She is given several titles and roles. Firstly Judge, showing her role in military and community leadership, but also, uniquely among the judges, she renders legal decisions thereby undertaking the more traditional role of the judge in Israelite society.

She is also the only figure in Judges who is called a Prophet, as she is involved in communicating God's word to the people to show his saving power. It may seem that this role is also undertaken by other judges, but Gideon, Samson and others are more concerned with action, and so do not specifically communicate God's word to the people.

Deborah does not have a story of calling, as many of the other judges do. Instead, it could be interpreted that she is recognised as a judge by the people rather than an explicit call to her by God. This would mean that her sense of calling to her role is more in line with what many of us experience in our lives, rather than the dramatic calling we so often see in Scripture.



Deborah is involved in the leading of an Israelite army of 10,000 men against the army of the Canaanites, yet it is again through unusual means that the Israelites are given victory over their enemies. While the battle is going badly the leader of the Canaanites, Sisera, flees to what he thinks is a friendly place. However, while hiding him, Jael kills him by hammering a tent peg through his temple.

This story again falls into the brutal pattern of Judges, with the people being oppressed and then fighting back. It is a picture of a world in which the grace at the heart of the Law has been forgotten, and in which the chosen people of God have set aside their distinct ways of living and have embraced the way the world uses power.

In many ways Deborah is one of the more successful Judges. For many of the judges their work is undone quickly after their death. They lead the people back to God, and then once they are gone the people forget all that has been done for them. This is not the case with Deborah, at least not immediately. The people remain true to God for 40 years after the rule of Deborah, before once again forgetting all that God had done for them.

***Aim***

To explore the character of Deborah and see why she was so respected by the people around her.

***Main points to cover***

1. Deborah had a calling on her life and seemed to experience it much like we do.
2. She served the people and tried to bring peace and justice to them.
3. She centred her life on God's work and His calling to her.

***Focus On***

Deborah's authority was based on her character and the respect she was given



**Activity ideas**

Points means prizes! Split the young people into groups and ask them to read through Judges 4:1-6. Encourage them to pick out all the things that show us that Deborah was well respected by the people around her. They are: She was described as a prophet; She was a Judge; the people came to her so she could settle disputes; when she summons the General he comes to her. Give them a point for each one and give a prize to the group that managed to spot the most.

God calls, we answer. Ask the young people to go back through the verses they just read, and pick out where Deborah was called. Encourage them think back to Gideon and contrast the way he was called. Deborah's calling is not talked about at all, and it seems from that that her calling was more low key, and more like the calling most of us experience. Ask the young people to think about God's calling on their lives. What do they feel called to and how do they think God is calling them to that?

Why should people listen to me? We often feel as though we should be heard because we like what we have to say, but we need to look at people like Deborah and see people of substance who were listened to because they were respected. Ask the young people why they think they should be listened to by the people around them. Challenge them to think that, like Deborah, we need to be people of substance that are respected before people will treat what we have to say as something worth listening to. By doing that, we can help people to come to see God in their lives.



## Samson

### Reading: Judges 14-15

#### *Leader's reflection*

The story of Samson is a great lesson for us that because we are reading Scripture, it doesn't mean that what takes place is endorsed by God. In fact, many times we read stories and we can clearly see that what takes place in the story is distinctly NOT what God wanted to take place.

We can sometimes forget that when it comes to reading Judges, because there is very little framing of stories. When we read about the Kings of later times, they are often labelled as either good or bad, and so we have a framework for interpreting their actions. That is almost entirely absent from the book of Judges, and that causes us problems for people like Samson, especially when it all started so well for him.

Samson was set aside from the moment of conception to be a servant of God. Specifically he was to become a Nazirite, which involved abiding by strict rules for living including abstaining from alcohol, not cutting hair, and strict avoidance of dead bodies. In many respects, Samson was a complete failure as a Nazirite. Instead of avoiding dead bodies a large portion of his time was spent using his God given strength making them. He was supposed to be dedicated to the Law, and therefore to not marry or get involved with women from the surrounding nations, and yet a large portion of his time was spent chasing after foreign women. He is determined to marry a Philistine woman and, at the wedding celebration, he tells a riddle which leads to betrayal, and an escalating violence between Samson and the Philistines.

Delilah is another foreign woman who he chases after, and who is tasked with finding out how to defeat Samson. Eventually in frustration he tells her the truth and the story shifts from an adventure style story to one of tragedy, in which Samson has his eyes put out, and is made their prisoner. At the end he is forced to



dance in the temple to Dagon, the Philistines God, before he is given a chance at revenge against them.

The entire story of Samson is a hard one to decode and to find the meaning of. It has the hyperbole and excessiveness of a Greek myth, in which the hero overcomes overwhelming odds to triumph. It is important to remember the context it came from. A people who were once again facing persecution and living in fear in their own land would look for a hero to give them hope. These stories may have come out of people searching for a way to vent their frustrations against the situation they found themselves in, a way to show that there was a way their enemies could be defeated.

The contrast between Samson and other Judges is stark; many of the others are examples of people standing for God against oppression, while Samson seems to be a lone hero using the ways of the world to defeat the world. The lesson for us here then, while being careful to moralise stories that were never meant for moralising, is that we have choices to make as to how we use the gifts and talents that God gives us. Samson was given huge strength, a solid basis of faith, and the blessing of God over his life, and yet he used it to cause pain, hurt and destruction throughout his life. We need to remember that just because we have the blessing of God, He doesn't endorse all our actions, and that we need to put Him, instead of our own desires, at the heart of what we do.

**Aim** To think about how do we might mis-use the gifts that God gives us

**Main points to cover**

1. Samson was given an amazing opportunity to serve God.
2. He was given gifts and talents by God, and was set aside for a special purpose.
3. He chose to use his gifts and talents to chase his own desires, and put aside God's call on his life.

**Focus On** The gifts and talents our young people have that they use for their own good rather than the good of others.



### Activity ideas

Before looking at the story ask the young people to list all the things they know about Samson, and all the things they know he did. If they know nothing that's fine and move on. If they know some things see if they characterise them as positive or negative. Ask them why they characterise them that way and see what they say. Come back to their answers after you have read the story

Exploring Samson. Put the young people into groups and give each group one of the following incidents from Samson's life to look at: Judges 14, Judges 15. What are the young people's impressions of what Samson is like? Is he mostly good or mostly bad? Explain that Samson was chosen for a special task, to help the Israelites against the Philistines, and was given superhuman strength to do that. Ask the young people if they have noticed what Samson's main motivation is for doing things. It is mostly chasing women, and when people get in the way of that, he kills them. Ask the young people of they think that is what God wanted Samson to do.

We are all a bit like Samson... We all know that we are given skills, gifts and talents by God, and often we use them for our own benefit. This is not just true of Christians. Have some pictures of people who are well known for being very good at something, but who are non-Christians. Examples could include Jack Whitehall, Dr Brian Cox, George Ezra plus some others. Ask the young people what gifts and talents God has given these people that they could use to serve God. Spend some time with the young people exploring this for themselves. If it helps have them have some paper and find some space so they can spend some time talking to God about what He has given them that they can use to serve Him. Make sure that you clarify that serving God doesn't mean doing stuff in church, but is much wider than that and could be to do with something the young people are passionate about as much as something they are good at.