

Summary for Session 10: Conquest and Judges—Part 2

Prep work: Judges

DVD: Jeff opens the session by pointing out that the author of Judges notes twice the underlying truth of this period—there was no leader of Israel after Joshua, so each was left to do what was right in his own eyes. Jeff remarks that at times, it may seem like the same situation exists today (especially in the USA)—we are left to our own devices to follow God's Will. Jeff also reminds us of Moses' prescriptions to the people before he died: they must remember that God is one and only, and they must teach their children their beliefs. Despite this admonition, also echoed by Joshua before he dies, the very next generation of Israelites becomes a people who do not know God and practice idolatry. The cycle of the Judges period begins. First comes sin (instigated by idolatry), then servitude (God allows the Israelites either in whole or part to come under another ruler's power), then supplication (the people cry out to God for salvation), then salvation (God frees them by means of a judge), and finally, silence (a period of peace). This cycle is repeated over and over, and the people used by God to save the Israelites are called judges. Jeff clarifies that the term “judges” in this sense does not refer to someone who dispenses judgment so much as a warrior leader who fights against the oppressor. God reveals Himself through these leaders. While the book of Judges records the accounts of twelve such leaders, Jeff remarks on three: Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Jeff pauses to ask a question many have asked while hearing the Israelites' story: Why can't Israel learn from it's mistakes? Why must they repeat the cycle of sin so continuously? The answer is that they are human, just as we are human. We repeat our sins with alarming frequency; it makes sense, therefore, that Israel does the same.

Deborah is the only female judge, and Jeff notes that her name means “buzzing bee,” perhaps a reference to Exodus 23:28 where God says the Canaanites will be driven out as if chased by bees.

Gideon is an example of God calling the unlikely, the least man of the least tribe. Jeff notes, however, that Gideon had been taught of God's deeds, and also that he was working while God called to him. Jeff takes this as a reminder that God will work through all of us where we are at; we are called to be faithful, and do not need to be in an extraordinary position to do it. Jeff also remarks that Gideon's question to God about why God does not do great deeds in this age, is more a case of Gideon not looking for God's works than God not doing anything. A good lesson for us in our time, as well. In the end, Gideon is triumphant and the people try to make him king. Jeff comments that we humans are hardwired for community and leadership; as Gideon advises, we should look to God as the ruler of our lives. Gideon refuses to be king and swears his sons will not be king, either (something to keep in mind when later, his son Abimelech tries to rule and is killed).

Samson is from the tribe of Dan, who live in the southwest corner of Canaan, near where the Gaza Strip is today. They were constantly assaulted by the Philistines, who lived next to them and were known as skilled warriors. Samson's story serves as a microcosm of Israel at the time, and we can even see our situation as Catholics in the world today in the story of Samson. Samson is dedicated even at birth as a nazirite, and he is sworn to

leave his hair unshorn and to never drink alcohol. It is important to note that it is not his hair that is the source of his strength so much as his being consecrated to God. Giving the secret of his hair and allowing it to be cut, Samson is consciously reversing his nazarite vow of fidelity and reverting back to the world of the profane. He presumed he would still have God's grace even though he effectively renounced God, and it is a shock to him that his strength is utterly gone. As an aside, Jeff notes that Samson's name means "sunshine" and Delilah's means "night". The darkness has eclipsed the light for a time. Samson repents right away, however, and his strength returns. The Danites as a tribe decide to find another portion of land to live on, and move north of the Sea of Galilee.

Jeff takes up the story of Ruth at this point, remarking that even though it is its own book and is placed after Judges, the story fits into the middle of the time period of the Judges. It is a reversal of the story told in Judges. Whereas Israel, God's chosen, forsakes God and turns toward idols, Ruth forsakes her pagan origins and chooses to follow God. Ruth's vow to stay with Naomi resonates with the language of the Covenant. They go back to Naomi's home of Bethlehem in humbled straits, reduced to gleaning fields for food like beggars. Boaz appears as the kinsman redeemer who saves them from their poverty (Jesus, our brother, is our "kinsman redeemer"). Because of Naomi and Ruth's faithfulness, they will be part of the direct line of David and later, Jesus. Jeff notes that this story shows that God always has a purpose throughout our life; He is never done with us!

The last story reviewed in this session is also the hardest. The story of the Benjamites should shock us—how could humans, especially God's chosen, have fallen so far? In Hebrew, they are called "the sons of Beliel" signifying not only extreme perversion, but also the Devil's followers. The moral for us is clear: Do not allow venial sins to go unchecked. They will build to disturbing proportions.

The door on the Judges is not quite closed, as there will be some overlap with Samuel, but a king for Israel is coming. The Israelites have clamored for one, but will they be any better at keeping the Covenant under a king?