

Today we'll summarize the stories from the time of Judges. So far, we've talked about the stories from the beginning of the time of Judges and the stories from the end. Today, we have the stories in-between as we wrap up the stories from the time of Judges. It was the time "Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25).

The book of Judges traces the period between the death of Joshua and the rise of the monarchy in Israel. It covers the time God's people doing what is right in their own eyes. Israel chose to obey God only partially, which led to a repeated cycle of sin, oppression, crying out to God for help, God's deliverance of His people through a judge, short-term peace, complacency, and sin yet again. Over and over, this cycle occurred in the land. That's when the judges came in as it is stated in Judges 2:16, "Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders."

In some respects, the title of the book is a bit misleading to English readers. The title "judge" makes us think of someone who determines guilt or innocence in a court case. But the Hebrew word שֹׁפֵט (shaphat) that is used for the title of the book here has a much broader meaning. The Hebrew term שֹׁפֵט (shaphat), which is translated into English as "judge," is closer in meaning to a ruler, military leader, and deliverer from potential or actual defeat. In the book of Judges, the judges are *leaders* chosen by God to deliver His people.

There are 12 judges or leaders mentioned in the book of Judges. I will name all 12 of them. While hearing the names, try to count how many of them you are familiar with from the list. Ready? Here are the names of 12 judges—Othniel (Judges 3:7-11), Ehud (Judges 3:15-22), Shamgar (Judges 3:31), Deborah (Judges 4-5), Gideon (Judges 6-9), Tola (Judges 10:1-2), Jair (Judges 10:3-5), Jephthah (Judges 10:6-12:7), Ibzan (Judges 12:8-10), Elon (Judges 12:11-12), Abdon (Judges 12:14-15), and Samson (Judges 13-16). How many of them are you familiar with from the list? Some of them are well known than others. I think many of us are familiar with the stories of Deborah—the woman judge, Gideon—the warrior with his 300 men, and Samson—the strongest man who ever lived. Some of us might also know Ehud—the left-handed judge.

The first 16 chapters of the book focus on Spirit-empowered judges who look more like Avengers than legal experts. Samson looks more like Thor than Judge Judy. But in truth, with the notable exception of Othniel, the book of Judges goes to great lengths to show that these human heroes are all zeroes in one sense or another. God raised up the unlikely Judges—the broken, the injured, old, young, men and women—to ultimately rescue God's people.

Othniel (Judges 3:7-11), whose name means "Lion of God," was the only judge with no inherent flaws spoken about him, and he was at least 60 years old when God raised him up to be a judge. Though he was an unlikely judge due to his age, he had seen God's faithfulness over the years. Through his short story in the book of Judges, we learn that we are never too old to be used by God, and our best days should never be behind us. The best is yet to come for us.

Ehud (Judges 3:12-30) was a judge who was "left-handed." The Hebrew word for "left-handed" is שמאל (smar). It literally means "weak or restricted in the right hand." Ehud was physically different than most people and possibly disabled. From his story, we know that God uses people despite their physical weaknesses or restrictions, or even uses people because of those weaknesses. Every restriction we have allows the world to see how unrestricted God is in using us.

Jephthah (Judges 11:1-12:7) was the illegitimate son of a prostitute mother and adulterous father. He was despised and rejected by his half-brothers, stripped from his rightful inheritance, and forced out of his home and onto the streets, where he would eventually join a gang and commit to a life of crime and rebellion from God. Sadly, his life would forever be marked by a tragic vow that would cost him everything. He was unlikely in every way to have a life of significance, let alone be used by God as a hero and deliverer for God's nation. Yet his is a story of redemption. This is a story that reminds us that none of us are beyond God's power to save, and none of us are beyond God's grace to restore.

Again and again, the stories from the book of Judges reveal that salvation comes from God's initiative, not man's. God is calling and utilizing unlikely people for God's ministry. This is the good news for many of us who feel that we are not qualified to partner with God. Do you feel that you are unlikely people God can use? If yes, come to the table of God's grace today and see what God can do with your unlikeliness today. Amen.