

# God, Help Me Overcome My Circumstances

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## **GOD, HELP ME OVERCOME MY CIRCUMSTANCES**

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*To Barry Teague  
in deep appreciation for a heart  
that beats for Christ and his work  
and a life that is dedicated to  
blessing Jesus' kingdom.*

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# Introduction

## These Stories Are About Us

**T**he day after Christmas 2012, a cable television host interviewed a prominent pastor on his show. “You and I know,” the host said, “that the Bible is, in many places, a flawed document...It’s time for an amendment to the Bible. You should compile a new Bible.”

This TV host expressed the spirit of the age in which we live. Mere human beings claim the right to edit and amend God’s Word. They believe the Bible must change in order to accommodate the latest social fad or political cause. In this way, our culture mirrors the culture of Israel in the time of the Judges, when (as we read in Judges 17:6 and 21:25), “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

In our culture, and even in some parts of the church, God’s Word is neglected and disrespected. If we don’t like what the Bible says about sin, morality, the sanctity of the family, the sanctity of life, or the claim of Jesus to be the only way to God the Father, we just edit

those parts out. We pretend that God didn't really say that, or he didn't really mean that. Forsaking the Bible, we simply do whatever is right in our own eyes.

The parallels between the book of Judges and our own post-Christian age are unmistakable—and many of these parallels are deeply troubling. If God did not allow the people of Israel to get away with their apostasy, why do we expect God to simply wink at our spiritual and moral defection? Has God changed? Out of his great love for Israel, God disciplined Israel and called the people to repentance again and again. So we have to ask ourselves, “Is God, out of his great love, disciplining our nation? And is he disciplining and refining the church?”

Again and again in the book of Judges, Israel strayed from God. And each time, God used enemy nations to oppress and discipline Israel and call the people to repentance. Today, as our nation faces decline, economic upheaval, global tensions, and the constant menace of terrorism, we have to ask ourselves: Is God using these circumstances to discipline us, to call us collectively and individually to repentance?

Whenever Israel repented and turned back to God, he sent a deliverer to rescue the people from their oppressors. The people God used as “judges,” as deliverers of Israel, were not super-saints. As we will see, they were ordinary people with flaws and struggles and weaknesses, just like you and me. Don't ever think that God cannot use you. If God can use flawed human beings like Gideon and Samson, he can use you.

Another parallel we see between the time of the judges and the times in which we live is the abandonment of absolute truth. The moral relativism practiced in apostate Israel is no different from the moral relativism we see in our culture—and, tragically, in many of our churches—today. Both then and now, people rejected God's absolute standard of truth, and everyone did what was right in their



own eyes. The nineteenth-century writer James Russell Lowell put it this way in a poem of protest and outrage against the vile practice of human slavery, a poem called “The Present Crisis” (1844):

Truth forever on the scaffold,  
Wrong forever on the throne,—  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
and, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow,  
keeping watch above his own.

Truth was murdered on the scaffold in the time of the judges. Truth was murdered on the scaffold in James Russell Lowell’s time. Truth is still on the scaffold today, in the twenty-first century. Wrong is still on the throne of the systems of this world. Yet God is keeping watch today, as he was back then.

In the pages that follow, you will see parallel after parallel between those times and our time. You will see that the stories in the book of Judges are not just Sunday school stories. They are stories about *our* time, *our* culture, *our* churches, *our* sins. They are stories about *us*.

And there is one more parallel between then and now. It’s a parallel of hope and encouragement. In Judges 21:25, God’s Word tells us *why* everyone did what was right in their own eyes. It was because, “In those days there was no king in Israel.”

The people of Israel during that time had no authority figure to rule them, guide them, and hold them accountable. Israel had no king—but a king was coming.

At the close of the time of the judges, God appointed a prophet named Samuel who would anoint Israel’s greatest king—a king named David. King David would become, in many ways, a symbolic foreshadowing of King Jesus.

David stood alone against a seemingly invincible enemy, Goliath,

who mocked God and threatened God's people. David served as the representative of all the people. He killed Goliath and delivered the people of Israel. He was later crowned king and ruled all of Israel from his capital city, Jerusalem.

In much the same way, Jesus stood alone against Satan, who mocked God and threatened God's people. Jesus represented the entire human race when he hung upon the cross. Jesus destroyed Satan and delivered us from sin and death. He is coming again to be crowned King and to rule over all the earth from Jerusalem.

The nation of Israel was in moral and spiritual decline, and could not defend itself against its enemies. The people had no king, so everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Our own circumstances seem equally hopeless. Our nation, our world, and even our church are in moral and spiritual decline. We are under attack, we are in disarray, and everyone does what is right in his own eyes. But today, as in the time of the judges, our King is coming. When Jesus returns, he will rule with righteousness and justice.

Today, we cry out to the Lord, "God, help me overcome my circumstances!" Some of those circumstances may be the result of our own moral failure and spiritual defection. Have we, like ancient Israel, forgotten God's love for us? Have we forgotten all of his grace and goodness toward us in the past? Perhaps God is using these difficult circumstances to remind us how much we need him. Perhaps God is calling us to repentance.

I hope that in the pages of the book of Judges, we will see God's love for us, and that our love for him would be rekindled. As we pray, "God, help me overcome my circumstances," may we also pray, "God, I repent of my sin. I recommit myself to you. I choose to live for you. Come be the Lord of my life once more!"

No matter how dark and troubled our circumstances, God

stands ready to deliver us. Even though Truth is on the scaffold and Wrong is on the throne, our King is coming. He will come in victory. He will deliver us. He will save us.

So turn the page. Let's explore this ancient book and hear God's message for us today.



# 1

## Tales of Defection and Deliverance

**T**he book of Judges is one of the most dramatic books of the Bible. It could spin off dozens of epic adventure movies, political intrigue and spy novels, and even soap operas. On the surface, its tales provide fascinating, even thrilling reading.

But on a deeper level, this book is a powerful indictment of the condition I call “spiritual amnesia.” Again and again throughout Judges, we see the people of Israel forgetting God’s love, God’s commands, and God’s Word. The people experience God’s blessing, they become self-satisfied and prideful, and they descend into spiritual defection and defeat. Then and only then do they remember God and cry out to him for deliverance. Then God graciously sends a deliverer.

The contrast between Joshua and Judges is stark. While Joshua was an account of Israel’s victories in its conquest of the Promised

Land, Judges is the account of Israel's failure and defeat. Here is an outline of the book of Judges:

1. Israel fails to completely conquer the Promised Land—  
Judges 1:1–3:4
2. The judge Othniel—Judges 3:7-11
3. The judge Ehud—Judges 3:12-30
4. The judge Shamgar—Judges 3:31
5. The judge Deborah—Judges 4–5
6. The judge Gideon—Judges 6:1–8:35
7. The judge Abimelech—Judges 9
8. The judge Tola—Judges 10:1-2
9. The judge Jair—Judges 10:3-5
10. The judge Jephthah—Judges 10:6–12:7
11. The judge Ibzan—Judges 12:8-10
12. The judge Elon—Judges 12:11-12
13. The judge Abdon—Judges 12:13-15
14. The judge Samson—Judges 13–16
15. The depravity of Israel: idolatry and immorality—  
Judges 17–18
16. Civil war among the tribes—Judges 19–21

The pattern of Israel's moral and spiritual defeat is set in the very first chapter of Judges. There we read that “the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem” (1:21), the tribe of “Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages” (1:27), the tribe of “Ephraim did not drive out the

Canaanites who lived in Gezer” (1:29), the tribe of “Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron” (1:30), “the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out” (1:32), the tribe of “Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants” (1:33), and on and on.

Why did the tribes of Israel fail to carry out God’s command? Apparently, many Israelites found it more profitable to exploit the Canaanites than to drive them out, as we see in 1:28: “When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely.” The Israelites didn’t take God seriously when he warned against the moral and spiritual pollution of the Canaanites and their idols. So the Israelites mingled with the Canaanites, traded with them, sometimes enslaved them, and eventually began to intermarry with them and worship pagan idols with them—fulfilling God’s warning.

The Israelites set themselves up for decline and collapse when they failed to obey God’s commandments. They settled for half a victory.

Before we judge the Israelites too harshly, we need to examine ourselves and ask: Have we settled for half a victory over our sin and self-defeating habits? Have we driven out our bad habits of gossip, lust, bitterness, anger, foul language, or addiction? Do we excuse our vices or are we committed to complete victory over them by driving them out of our lives? These “small” compromises (at least we like to think of them as small) are an accommodation with the enemy. We are symbolically mingling and intermarrying with the Canaanites—and if we do not drive them out, we will end up defeated.

## **Israel’s Defection**

We see how these supposedly small compromises led the people of Israel into the depths of degradation and defection in Judges 2:

Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you” (2:1-3).

Even though the people of Israel received a warning directly from an angel of the Lord, they chose to defect from faith in God and to degrade themselves with false gods:

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath (2:11-13).

Baal was the male fertility god of the Canaanites, and Ashtaroath was the Canaanite fertility goddess. The Israelites were well aware of the Ten Commandments, which begin:

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:3-5a).



When the Israelites started down the road of spiritual defection, they never imagined they would end up violating the First Commandment. They only intended to make a few compromises with sin. They knew God had told them to drive out the Canaanites, but they were confident that enslaving the Canaanites and exploiting their forced labor would be even better than driving them out.

In time, just as God had warned them, they were soon partaking in the idolatry of the Canaanites—an idolatry that was connected with the obscene fertility rites and sexual practices of the Canaanites. The Israelites didn't merely bow down before idols of stone and brass. They also engaged in the horrible and indescribable immorality of the Canaanites. They descended to such a state of moral and spiritual bankruptcy that God had no choice but to discipline the nation of Israel for its disobedience:

So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress (2:14-15).

The hand of the Lord was against the people of Israel. Why, because God hated the Israelites? No! It was because God loved them. God didn't want to destroy his people but to save them from their foolishness and sin. So he showed the Israelites that as long as they disobeyed him and worshiped false gods, nothing in their lives would work out right. They would march off to war and face defeat. The tribes they had once enslaved now enslaved them and ruled over them.

## The Twelve Judges

The Israelites found themselves in terrible distress—and out of their distress, they cried out to God. Then God in his grace sent Israel a series of deliverers called *judges*:

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them (2:16-18).

Even after the people of Israel sinned grievously against God, he graciously sent them judges to deliver them. Did the people of Israel learn from their past sins and defections? The book of Judges records the tragic and ungrateful response of the people to God's gracious deliverance:

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways (2:19).

Not only did the people of Israel repeat the pattern of disobedience, but with each cycle, they descended into worse and worse sin and corruption. Whenever a judge died, the people became

even *more* corrupt than their fathers had been. In all, God raised up twelve judges over Israel—eleven men and one woman:

The judge *Othniel* (3:9-11). The people of Israel were oppressed and enslaved for eight years by Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. Then God raised up Othniel, a nephew of the great Israelite hero Caleb. Othniel led Israel into battle, ended the oppression of the Mesopotamians, and ushered in forty years of peace. That era of peace ended when Israel was defeated by Eglon, king of Moab.

The judge *Ehud* (3:11-29). After the Israelites had suffered eighteen years of oppression under the Moabites, God raised up Ehud. This judge and deliverer went to King Eglon to bring him the annual payment that Moab demanded from Israel. Being a left-handed man, Ehud was able to hide a double-edged short sword on his right thigh, where the Moabites would not think to look. When Ehud was alone with King Eglon, he said, “I have a message from God for you.” Then he drew the sword and plunged it into the body of the king of Moab, and the king was so grossly overweight that the short sword went into him, hilt and all. By the time the king’s attendants found Eglon dead, Ehud was miles away. He rallied the Israelite tribes and led them to victory against the leaderless Moabites—and there was peace in Israel for eighty years.

The judge *Shamgar* (3:31). The description of Shamgar, the son of Anath, is tantalizingly brief. One other brief mention of Shamgar in Judges 5:6 tells us that crime was rampant when God raised him up as a judge. The Scriptures tell us that “the highways were abandoned, and travelers kept to the byways.” There is no introduction or conclusion to the story of Shamgar, nor is there any indication how long he was a judge in Israel. We are told only that Shamgar “killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.”

The judge *Deborah* (chapters 4–5). The only woman judge mentioned in Scripture, Deborah rallied the Israelites and led a victorious attack against the Canaanite king Jabin and his army commander, Sisera. Deborah brought forty years of peace to Israel. We will examine her story in detail in this book.

The judge *Gideon* (chapters 6–8). After the four decades of peace following the victory of Deborah, Israel was oppressed by the Midianites and Amalekites. So God raised up Gideon from the tribe of Manasseh and commanded him to remove idol worship from Israel and to free the people from foreign oppression. Gideon was initially insecure and reluctant to trust God's command, so he asked God for three forms of miraculous proof that this command truly came from God—and God supplied the proof. In obedience to God, Gideon reduced his army from thirty-two thousand men to a mere three hundred, and though vastly outnumbered, Israel defeated the Midianites by God's power. Gideon is named in Hebrews 11 as a great role model of faith. We will examine his story in detail.

The judges *Tola* (10:1-2) and *Jair* (10:3-5). The book of Judges tells us little of these two men. We know that Tola was a judge in Israel for twenty-three years and Jair the Gileadite judged Israel for twenty-two years.

The judge *Jephthah* (11:1–12:7). Jephthah delivered Israel by leading the army of Israel to victory over the Ammonites. The son of a prostitute, Jephthah was driven from home by his half-brothers, the legitimate sons of his father, Gilead. But when the Ammonites attacked, the elders of Gilead sent for Jephthah and put him in charge of the army. As Jephthah prepared to go to war against the Ammonites, he vowed to God, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall

be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (Judges 11:30b-31).

Jephthah was victorious—but when he returned home, the first living creature he saw was his daughter, his only child, dancing in his honor. Bound by his vow, Jephthah tore his clothes and wept, and he gave his daughter two months' grace before carrying out his vow. Jephthah's daughter graciously accepted her fate, saying, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites" (11:37). She and her friends went into the mountains to mourn that she would never marry. After two months, she returned to her father "who did with her according to his vow that he had made" (11:39).

The standard interpretation of this last statement is that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, though it is not entirely certain that he did so. The text doesn't specifically tell us that he killed her. The statement that whatever he meets "shall be the LORD's, *and* I will offer it up for a burnt offering" could also be translated "shall be the LORD's, *or* I will offer it up for a burnt offering." In other words, Jephthah might have dedicated his daughter to a life of chastity and lifelong virginity. Jephthah would surely have known that human sacrifice, which was associated with the false religion of the pagans, is detestable to the Lord under the law of Moses (see Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:9-12). So while Jephthah's vow was certainly foolish and tragic for his daughter, it might have resulted in her remaining chaste for life instead of resulting in her death.

The judges *Ibzan* (12:8-10), *Elon* (12:11), and *Abdon* (12:13-15). Little is written about these three judges. Ibzan was a judge in Israel for seven years and was buried in Bethlehem (though there is some question whether he was buried in Bethlehem of Judah, where Jesus

was born, or Bethlehem of Zebulun in Galilee). Elon was a judge in Israel for ten years, and Abdon was a judge for eight years. The historian Josephus mentions Abdon and tells us that Israel was at peace during his tenure as judge.

The judge *Samson* (chapters 13–16). The story of Samson is dealt with at length in Judges, and we will take a close look at his life. Samson's birth was prophesied by an angel, who told his parents that he would begin to deliver the Israelites from the Philistine oppressors. At the time that Samson was born, Israel had suffered under the Philistines for forty years. Samson's parents dedicated him to God and to keeping the Nazirite vows. These vows are described in Numbers 6:1-21 (the Hebrew word *nāzîr* from which we get *Nazirite* means “consecrated”).

God blessed Samson and the Spirit of God was on him. Moreover, the Holy Spirit gave Samson amazing strength—the strength to kill a young lion that attacked him and tear it to pieces, the strength to kill thirty Philistine men in Ashkelon, and the strength to kill a thousand Philistine soldiers while he was armed only with the jawbone of a donkey.

But Samson foolishly told the spy Delilah the secret of his strength. She betrayed Samson to the Philistine oppressors, and the Philistines put out his eyes and made him a slave in Gaza. In the end, the Philistines gathered in the temple of Dagon to make sacrifices to their pagan deity in gratitude for delivering their hated enemy, Samson, into their hands. Leaning against the central pillars of the temple, Samson prayed to God for strength—then he dislodged the pillars with his bare hands, killing the Philistine rulers and about three thousand other Philistines. After his death, his family took his body and buried him in the tomb of Manoah his father.

## Your Deliverer

In the time of the judges, God always sent Israel a deliverer to rescue them from the consequences of their sin and folly. The people of Israel went through cycle after cycle of defection, discipline, and deliverance. They didn't have to continually wobble from deliverance to defection and back again, but that was how they chose to live. The Israelites had free will and could have chosen obedience to God. Instead, they chose to compromise with sin.

That's the tragic lesson of the book of Judges. If we don't want to follow the same pattern, we need to take God's commands seriously. No longer can we accommodate ourselves to sin and to the surrounding culture. God calls us to drive those self-defeating habits out of our lives. We need to live lives that are distinct from the world around us, lives that are distinctly Christian and Christlike. If we fail to take God's Word seriously, if we choose to flirt with sin instead of dealing with it, firmly and decisively, we will end up like the Israelites, repeatedly bringing sorrow and suffering upon ourselves.

As we read through Judges, we see that the judges were not super-spiritual saints. Some of them were deeply flawed. Several serve more as warnings than as role models. Samson's pursuit of pagan women shows an amazing lapse of judgment on his part. God had repeatedly warned the Israelites against being "unequally yoked" (as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 6:14) with unbelievers, and Samson's parents pleaded with him to stay away from Philistine women. But Samson was not only strong, he was headstrong, and he did what was right in his own eyes. He ultimately paid a heavy price for his willfulness.

The story of Jephthah also serves as a warning to others. Never make a rash vow, because you may have to keep it, to your own

sorrow and regret. Whether Jephthah sacrificed his daughter's physical life or her future happiness by committing her to a celibate lifestyle, his reckless vow was costly for both of them. Don't make promises you cannot keep, and don't swear an oath. In all your dealings with God and with other people, let your yes be yes and your no be no.

The key insight of Judges appears twice in the book: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6 and 21:25). It is rightly said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. The people of Israel did not set out to do evil. They wanted to do right—but they did what was right in their own eyes. They did what was right according to human wisdom, but they neglected the wisdom of God.

That is the theme of Judges. It's a warning we will bear in mind as we take a closer look at three important figures from this book—Deborah, Gideon, and Samson.