

# The Days of the Judges

## Part 1

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[00:00:00] The book of Judges is a very sad book in many respects. It opens on a very high note, two tribes dependent upon the Lord and concerned about acquiring the territory that belonged to them in the purpose of God, a very noble ideal, clearly people operating in the mind of the Lord.

When we come to the end of the book, we find a very, very sad condition. There was no king in Israel in those days, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes. No direction, no order, no law, independency, lawlessness. What a sad end to a promising start.

[00:01:01] Now this book rises to quite high heights of faith and courage, and sinks to abysmal depths of sin and lawlessness and wickedness. And I believe in many ways it represents the day in which we find ourselves. The people of God, many of them concerned about things in the sight of God and seeking help from the Lord to do what is right. Unfortunately, many others professing the name of Christ, not concerned about his glory or about his truth. It occupies a very interesting place in the history of God's dealings with his people Israel. On the one hand, there is the glorious dual leadership of Moses and Joshua. Moses, the great deliverer out of Egypt, the lawgiver, the leader through the wilderness, great man of God, [00:02:04] a man who spoke to God face to face, a man who was indeed for God in every sense of the word.

Joshua, his successor, leading the nation into the land, possessing much of the territory, setting a personal example to the nation, exhorting them not to serve other gods, and that he himself and his house, in spite of all that was against them, would serve the Lord. On the other hand, we find the great recovery beginning with the Amorabite's maiden, Ruth, and the recovery of Naomi, paving the way for the introduction of Hannah and Samuel and David and Solomon, the great heights to which Israel rose under the power and the might of God. And here, in these two great peaks of glory and blessing, we find this valley of darkness, [00:03:07] this valley of failure, this valley of departure from God. Thank God there are those who shine brightly in it, men and women, inspired with a desire to be true to God, a desire to be faithful in a day when many were being unfaithful. I think we can view the great leadership of our Lord Jesus Christ and all that he accomplished on Calvary's cross in the beginning of the church period. What a triumph! What glory was there, beloved brethren! Thank God what began then still exists. Oh, what a wonderful day that was! Power of the Spirit of God, souls being converted, assembly set up, the testimony of God circulating throughout the world, a time of unparalleled blessing and spiritual prosperity. It was not [00:04:06] very long before that came to an end—divisions, troubles, sin, strife. After the death of the apostles, there was scarcely anything that was recognizable to what began at Pentecost. So much evil had crept in, so much false doctrine. But God, in his mercy, granted recovery, and down through the history of the church we find men and

women of God rising above the prevailing conditions. Faith in God, dependence in God, refusing to acquiesce in the conditions, concerned to overcome for the pleasure and for the glory of God. And the history of the church is bright with those names—names that are revered amongst us—men and women who fought valiantly for the truth down through the ages. And we wouldn't be here this evening if it hadn't been for their [00:05:05] faithfulness. Unfortunately, many of those great movements declined. After the leaders died, after the fresh exercise of those men and women of God declined, there came deadness and failure and departure. And this has marked every movement of God right up to the present moment. But again I say, thank God, in spite of all the departure, there have always been those who desired, in the fear of God and in the power of the Spirit of God, to be true to him. And I challenge your heart as well as my own. Will this be our attitude to the prevailing declension that we find in our own day? Will the book of Judges provide for us help, stimulation that we [00:06:02] might desire above all else to be here for God in spite of all that is around? Now let us say at the very beginning that this that we find at the beginning of the chapter is something that's extremely encouraging. Two tribes desirous of obtaining their inheritance. And they exhibited two features that we might well covet today. First of all, dependence upon God. They asked the Lord what they were to do. And secondly, fellowship in attaining what they desired. Notice in verse one, the children of Israel asked the Lord, saying, who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first to fight against them? Now there is the secret of true prosperity before God. There was dependence [00:07:01] upon God. The great leader had gone. Joshua had departed. They might well have thrown up their hands in despair and said, there's no one to lead us. There's no one to guide us. There's no one to help us. But they didn't. They turned to God. It is quite startling that all through the Bible, whenever a leader dies, there seems to be failure following. This was true in the apostolic day. Didn't Paul warn the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20, when he says, after my departure, evil men shall spring up amongst you and shall lead the way disciples after themselves. False prophets after my departure. You see the power, the strength, the direction of the apostles [00:08:03] leadership was sufficient to keep at bay those evil things. But when he died, it seemed there was a great barrier removed and evil men began to work. Now this has always been true. But oh, there's this wonder in Christianity that no matter how great the leader is, he pales into insignificance in relation to our great leader, our Lord Jesus Christ. The saints of God are never without a leader. They always have a leader. They always have one to whom they can turn, the Lord Jesus Christ, the captain of our salvation. He is always and always will be the head of the body. No one can take this glory from him. He is the great high priest. He is the son over God's house. He is the one who is always available for his people. And it has been well said that God [00:09:06] buries his servants and carries on his work. The servants may be great, but they're not indispensable. The Lord Jesus Christ is always with his own so we can take courage.

We are sad that there are more men of God amongst us compared with days that have gone by. More men able to expound the scriptures, able to show us the way to live and to understand the truth. We would value their help today, but they aren't here. But we must go on. And the Lord Jesus has vouchsafed his presence to us to encourage us and help us in spite of all the difficulty. And I suggest to you, dear brethren, that from this passage there is the greatest possible encouragement. Dependence upon the Lord in prayer, whether individually or collectively, [00:10:04] and practical fellowship with each other are means that we can well use at all times to combat the evil tendencies of the day. Now, when the Lord saw this active amongst his people, this dependency and this fellowship, the Lord delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand. You see, the Lord was with them. It wasn't now Joshua. He wasn't in the forefront fighting the battles, directing the battle. The Lord was with them. After all, it was the Lord who delivered when Joshua was leading. Joshua might be in the forefront. He might be the spokesman. He might be the man whom God was using, but it was still the Lord who was winning the battles. It was the Lord who helped Moses. It was

the Lord who helped David. It was the Lord who helped every [00:11:08] servant of God down through the ages. But there was no outstanding man here. At least it doesn't appear to be so. They were men who were dependent, men who were willing to help each other. And the Lord delivered their enemies into their hands. Dear brethren, I'm not suggesting that we'll do miraculous things, sensational things, but I do take courage from this portion that where we exercise dependence upon the Lord and where we seek to help each other, something really worthwhile can be secured in the inheritance that belongs to us. We hold on to it in a practical way. We enjoy it in a deeper fashion. If this dual thing is in evidence, prayer and fellowship with each other, never alone. Those with whom we can walk, those with whom we can worship, [00:12:08] those with whom we can face the problems of the day and find courage and find strength. So, dear brethren, keep praying and keep assembling together and find our joy in each other's company. We know that the inheritance that belonged to Israel was an earthly one. They failed to secure it because of their unfaithfulness and their disobedience. We know that we have an inheritance. We have it in Christ. There is a future inheritance that we shall share. Thank God for that. We shall share it with him. But we have a wide range of eternal blessings, a wide range of spiritual blessings, which are secure and centered in Christ. And each one of us is responsible to God and privileged of God to enter into these things and to enjoy them. I believe that we don't enter into them simply [00:13:07] by having them on our bookshelves or even just having them in our minds as certain truths to be known and to be enjoyed in that fashion, but truths that are to take hold of our lives and govern us in our lives so that all can see that these things are paramount in our lives. These are the things that really matter. These are our inheritance. This is what we really believe. This is what we seek to lay hold of. This is what we seek to maintain. We never can unless we express this dependence on God and also in practical fellowship with each other. We find in this man, Othniel, one of the bright lights of the book of Joshua.

His name means Lion of God or Force of God. Different people give different interpretations [00:14:08] to his name. But whichever interpretation we like, we can see that it means there is power with this man. There is strength with this man. As we examine his life in the few details that we have of it, this name that he bears is amply borne out. First of all, what a favored young man he was. He belonged to the royal tribe Judah, that tribe from which our Lord Jesus Christ came, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He was one who set forth features that eventually were expressed in perfection in the Lord Jesus Christ himself. He was a man who was prepared to fight to overcome the enemy. He was a man [00:15:04] who fought to secure for himself a wife. He was a man who was governed by the Spirit of God and was used of God to secure great things for himself and for his people. I mean for God and for his people. These features that came to light in Othniel were seen in perfection in the great Lion of the tribe of Judah, our Lord Jesus Christ. He answered to the challenge. Oh, what a challenge it was. Satan faced him with this challenge. Immediately he set out in his public pathway. The temptations that we read in the scriptures. What a challenge. But he met that challenge and he overcame it. He overcame the great enemy of the people of God. He too loved the church and gave himself for it. He loved it that he might secure it for himself, that he might [00:16:07] have it for his own heart's desire and blessing. He too was governed by the Spirit of God. I use that word in a cautious sense. I do not mean that there was any possibility in the life of Jesus that he would in any way rebel against God or that he required to be controlled by the Spirit. I mean that in the gospels we find every step of the pathway of Jesus was in the power of the Spirit. And in the power of that Spirit he offered himself up to God without spot on the cross at Calvary. But we don't want to speak about the Lord tonight, precious as that is. It would be better if we spoke about him in one sense. But here is a portion of the word that speaks about one who had features that were like the Lord Jesus, Othniel, this courageous man. I think we could divide [00:17:09] his life into two portions. First of all, the challenge that came to him and secondly, the committal that was given to him. He came from this

royal tribe, a favored tribe that was a good position to be in. But not only was he in a good position, he expressed in his life that he was a real man of God. He was a real son of Judah, if you like. Judah was the tribe that was to reign. This is so we find in Moses' blessing of the tribes in Deuteronomy 33. The scepter shall not depart from Judah. Now here was one who was imbued by that Spirit. Here was one who says, right, I'm prepared to fight in order to secure this territory. It belongs to [00:18:01] us and I'm going to fight to secure it. It was Caleb who gave the challenge and he gave a wonderful promise too that for anyone who was prepared to overcome the city, there would be his daughter as a wife. Now Othniel, he answered to this challenge and he fought against the city Kirjath-sever. We understand that the name of this city means city of a book. I should say the meaning of its name is this, the city of the book. Now without being imaginative, I believe that we could suggest that this represents all the accumulated wisdom and knowledge that man has acquired down through all the ages of his culture, all the things that he boasts in, all the things that he has accumulated in opposition to God. My, the libraries are full [00:19:09] of that, aren't they? And there's nothing to help the soul. There's nothing to lead us to God. Indeed, it would all take us away from God. And we are reminded in the second chapter of first Corinthians that man by wisdom knew not God. And the princes of this world, they did not know the wisdom of God. If they had known it, they wouldn't have crucified the Lord of glory. And that skull, the place of a skull, really set forth the features of man's empty knowledge. No eyes to see God, no ears to hear anything about God, no tongues to speak for God, nothing in the mind to be held for God. The skull, an empty thing, man's wisdom.

[00:20:05] Now, this was the kind of thing that Caleb overthrew. He answered to the challenge. We might almost say, he said, there's only one thing that I'm concerned about is doing God's will in overthrowing all this that man boasts in and securing the city for God. There was certainly going to be blessing for him. This was, we might say, a secondary thing in one sense. The first thing was acquiring the territory that really belonged to God and his people. When the ark of the covenant went over the river Jordan, the name of the ark was the ark of the Lord of all the earth. And because the ark went over and the nation behind it, the nation was to secure the land for God, that it might be for his pleasure and his people in it. But conflict had to be waged [00:21:03] in order to make this a reality. And so Caleb says, if anyone's prepared to fight and overcome Kirjatsipha, I'll give him Ahsa, my daughter, for a wife. Well, not only was Othniel a member of a favored tribe, he had a very famous uncle, Caleb, a man who wholly followed the Lord.

What a man Caleb was, faithful man, devoted man. And we read in the book of Joshua that there came the moment when he said, now he says, I'm as strong today as I was when I set out on the wilderness journey. And he was well over 80 when he said that. And for 40 years, he had gone through the desert with Israel. And in his heart, there was the faith that lay hold of the land. He was prepared to share all the vicissitudes of the wilderness. He was prepared [00:22:07] to accept the government of God because of the failure of the others. But always in his heart was the desire of the land. I had the faith to go in and take it, but others wouldn't help me. And the time came when he had the opportunity and he proved that he had the faith and he had the strength and he overcame the territory that was rightly his and he acquired it. Now here is Othniel, the nephew of this great man. Now he showed the same characteristics.

Wouldn't it have been a wonderful thing if all the nephews and sons of the men of God were still following in the pathway of faith? But they haven't. Unfortunately, many of them have given up. Many of them have no interest in divine things. [00:23:02] But here was a true follower of his uncle. Here was one who exhibited exactly the same features, courage, determination, faith, in order to do the things that were pleasing to God.

And he overcame the city. It's a great thing when men are prepared to turn aside from man's knowledge with all its boasted heights and accept God's will and God's direction. I remember a young man who at one time was a very bright young Christian. He was a very intellectual young man, but there came a moment in his life when he didn't want to be connected with the few despised Christians in the university city where he was. When he occupied a chair in that university city, he said that his students wouldn't think very highly of him if he identified himself with the few Christians who were meeting there gathered to the Lord's [00:24:05] name. He despised them. There may come the day when his students will despise him. He made a choice for this world's wisdom, this world's position, and he refused the company of the few despised ones who sought to be true to the Lord according to the truth. And many others have failed in exactly the same way. This world's knowledge, with all its charm and with all the preeminence that it gives to people, seems to be too great an obstacle for young people to overcome. And they get carried away with it, and they would rather have that than the truth of God. But Othniel, he overcame. He wasn't going to be overcome by man's boasted knowledge, however great it was. He overcame, and in overcoming, he got a wonderful blessing. [00:25:02] Marvelous thing to have a good wife, a wife with spiritual desires, and that's what Othniel found. A woman who was urgent in desiring blessing, she asks Othniel to ask her father a blessing, and we get the impression that perhaps Othniel was a little slow. So she jumps down herself, and she goes to her father, and she asks this blessing. Give me a blessing, she says. Give me the upper and the nether springs. What a wonderful woman to have as a companion, one who was urgent in desire, one who knew what to ask for, something worthwhile. Now, I'm not going to attempt to spiritualize these two wells or two springs, the upper and nether springs, except to say that above all things, it represents real life and refreshment. [00:26:01] Those who have been in the Middle East know something about the scarcity of good, clean, fresh water. What a boon it is, very, very scarce in many parts, something to be desired. Oh, for a spring of cold, clear, fresh water. It means life. It means refreshment. It means health. It means wealth, too, for cattle and for produce. And this was one of the things that was promised by God in the book of Deuteronomy, a land flowing with brooks, with springs of water, an abundant supply of water. And here is this dear woman, she's asking for these two springs. She wants refreshment in her life. She wants life there, real life that she can depend upon. Now, we may make a reservoir, we may do all sorts of things in relation to water, but a spring is something that sovereignly comes from God, is it not? It's something that is there, [00:27:06] something that he has provided. It's something that springs up with life and vitality, and it's fresh and pure and clean. We read in the days of Genesis about the conflict that went on in relation to springs of water, and when they were filled up with earth, they had to be re-dug so that the springs would come forth with all the refreshing vigor. Now, here was a woman who says, I want two springs of water, and her father gave them to her. That was his present to her, and she was his present to Othniel. So he was wonderfully blessed. And this is the whole point of this story, dear brethren, that conflict is worthwhile. It's easy to give up, isn't it? Some particular problem in your life, some particular spiritual matter that requires to be entered into with God in conflict, and perhaps we're not finding [00:28:07] the blessing, we're not finding the victory, and it's so easy to say, well, what's the use? I'm not going to worry anymore. I'm not going to seek that victory that I was so concerned about. I'm going to give up. Now, Othniel says, I'm going to win. I'm determined to win.

And he did, and what a wonderful recompense he got. Now, I don't think for one moment that we should approach the difficulties of our spiritual lives just simply for having the joy of saying, I've won. That's surely a very low standard of spiritual desire. It's surely that we might be better equipped to represent God, that there might be more testimony in our lives, that there may be something worthwhile in our lives of a permanent character. After the battle was waged, and Othniel and Achsa went about arm in arm, people would say, there's the fruit of a man's [00:29:05] courage. There is to be

seen the value of a man who was prepared to fight for something, and look what he's obtained. There would be a witness, a continual witness of his courage, and of his faith, and of his sterling worth. There was the evidence of victory secure. Didn't Paul say to Timothy that he was to apply himself diligently to the things of the Lord, that his profiting might appear unto all? There would be the evidence in Timothy's life of a life devoted to God in earnest spiritual conflict, and that not only would be of personal profit to him, but would be of benefit to the saints of God also. And that is the real secret of conflict in connection with the things of the Lord. I don't think there is any Christian here [00:30:03] who is without conflict. We cannot be Christians without some sense of conflict. Satan attacks us every day of our lives, would overthrow us in our testimony if he could. Thank God for spiritual conflict and determination to overcome. Now in the second portion that I read, it's just reiterating what I've said already, that when the leader of the people of God dies, a very serious condition can afterwards prevail. And this is what happened. Verse 10, a generation arose which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done Those who have read Mr. Darby's letters will remember that he often wrote that he and his companions had to endure in great conflict in order to secure the truths that God had so [00:31:09] graciously given to them. They sacrificed a lot, but they did not give up. They did not give up what was graciously given to them. They sacrificed a lot. They endured a great deal of reproach, but they did secure a large part of the inheritance. What he feared was people coming into the enjoyment of these things or into the position where they were known without sufficient spiritual exercise to maintain those truths in power and testimony. And I think perhaps that's one of the reasons of the consequent declension of brethren testimony. People taking a position, occupying a position, without the exercise that belonged to it. Here was a generation. They arose. They didn't know the Lord. They didn't know his works. [00:32:04] That seems strange. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses instructed the fathers and mothers of Israel and said, now when your child asks, what do these things mean? Well, you explain them to the children, he says, and you explain all the history connected with those different occasions of coming together and the different events connected with the history of Israel. Here we find the responsibility of conveying the truth of the Lord lies very definitely upon the shoulders of the fathers and mothers, that the children were to be taught the great events connected with the history of Israel and the Lord's blessing to them. Now, if a generation arose that knew not the Lord or knew not his works, does it not infer that there was a lapse in the teaching of the fathers and mothers? Does it not infer that here was a generation that was [00:33:05] untaught in relation to the Lord and his works? And because they didn't know the Lord and because they didn't know his works, it was so easy to give up. They had nothing to hold on to. They were in a position with no living exercise connected with it, and it's so easy to give up something that you're not concerned about. So they forsook the Lord and they worshipped idols. Very, very sad condition. But you see, you can't do that in your life and get away with it. It's not just so easy as that. You can't profess to be a Christian and follow after idols and expect everything in the garden to be lovely. It wasn't so in Israel's case, and it won't be in our case. There won't be any spiritual joy. There won't be any life and power in our lives. If all that we are concerned about is idols and for ourselves, it means pleasing ourselves [00:34:03] and following the bent of our natural desires. Now, there's no joy towards God in Christ or any power and testimony in such a life. And that is why we are so thankful to turn to a man like Othniel, who seeks in the power of the Spirit of God to retrieve some of the fallen fortunes of Israel. And so in the chapter that we read, chapter three, it says when the children of Israel were given over into the hands of their enemies, they cried aloud to the Lord. They felt the burden of this government that was upon them because of their unfaithfulness, and they cried to the Lord. Verse nine, and when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them, even Othniel, [00:35:02] the son of Cain, Caleb's younger brother. And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel and went out to war. I think the inference is that he judged Israel for 40 years, and as long as he judged

Israel, there was blessing amongst them. Here is the committal that comes so soon after the challenge was met and secured.

This is the kind of person that God desires to use. God delights to use a man who has proved himself in personal conflict in relation to the things of God—an overcomer. This is the kind of person that the Spirit of God will use for blessing amongst the Saints. But I think it is good to see that the children of Israel felt their position. Brethren, do we really feel our weakness and poverty at the present moment? Are we really concerned about it before God? [00:36:08] Can we look down with vision, if the Lord does not come, as to what the outcome will be in a few years? Those who are able to teach, can we make it a matter of real concern before God that the present generation is taught adequately and correctly in view of the years that are ahead if the Lord does not come? That responsibility rests upon those who are older to make sure that the younger generation are correctly taught in view of the continuance of the testimony, as we know it, through grace. These people felt very keenly the prevailing conditions, and they cried to the Lord. Brethren, let us cry to the Lord that he will raise up those who are able to help us in our present weakness, that there might be blessing and encouragement [00:37:04] and food amongst the Saints of God in these last days until the Lord comes. The Lord heard the cry. He always hears genuine cries for help, not selfish cries or the pitiful breathings of casualness, but the real cryings, the concerns of the people of God in relation to need. He cried, and where did he turn to? To a proved man, a man who was reliable.

He raised up Othniel, and the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. Othniel wrought mightily, as he had done before at Kirjathsever, not to secure something for himself now, but for the people of God, for God's interests. This wasn't a personal matter. This was a matter of concern with God himself and his beloved people. All personal interests were at a side. [00:38:02] He was prepared to accept this committal that had been given to him, a deliverer raised up by God. Now, I don't think we should look upon ourselves as deliverers and think upon ourselves as some official person to be recognized amongst the Saints of God. I'm not thinking about that for a moment, but each one in our own lives, overcoming and providing in the power of the Spirit something of benefit for the people of God. In the Bible readings, in the ministry meetings, in our personal contact with the Saints, in opportunities of visitations, in any way in which we can help the present prevailing conditions. Othniel was used of God. After eighty years, this testimony was raised up. Othniel hadn't lost any of his exercise or any of his strength in the intervening period. Then, for forty years, he judged Israel. [00:39:01] There was a time of apparent prosperity and blessing. Unfortunately, we know that they weren't consolidating the time of blessing that they had secured. It was apparent strength, but it was only revealed as weakness after Othniel died. Oh, dear brethren, the moments that we have that are available for us to consolidate what we have are valuable moments. It's not for us to turn to the Lord for strength when we wasted the intervening moments when we could have been enjoying something of the things that God has given to us. We are required to be gathering up strength to consolidate what God has given us so that when the time of pressure and trial comes, we are able to stand. Othniel was faithful in the personal challenge. He was faithful in the committal that God gave to him. May we, in our day, be found in the same way, [00:40:04] overcoming in our individual lives, ready to help as governed by the Spirit of God. We should say in closing that there is this vast difference between the Spirit's power and activity in the Old Testament and that in the New. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel and as long as he required his power, it was there for him. Until the day he died, I believe he knew something of the power of the Spirit of the Lord upon him. But like David, the Spirit might be taken from him, or should I say Saul? The Spirit of the Lord was taken from Saul. Now, that could never happen at the present moment. We are sealed with the Spirit of God until the day of redemption. The Spirit of God indwells our hearts, our bodies until the day [00:41:03] the Lord comes for us or until the

day we die. If we are unfaithful, that's a very sad thing, but we won't lose the Spirit of God. He's always with us. The Lord promised that he would be with us forever. Isn't it sad then that in a day that is marked by glory and blessing and wonderful opportunity, we might fail to take advantage of the power and blessing that is there for us? May the Lord help us to be stimulated by the example of such a man as Othniel. One thing that I ought to have said at the beginning, and I'll say it now, we find exactly the same story in the book of Joshua. It is repeated here in the book of Judges, exactly the same word for word. Is it something that has just slipped in? No, dear brethren. It means that Othniel, in a day of blessing and prosperity and power, is portrayed as a man of courage and faith and a man who works [00:42:05] for God. The same story is brought in in a book that tells us of great weakness, great difficulty, great departure, and the moral is obvious that in days of prosperity and in days of weakness, the same opportunity is open to all to be faithful to the Lord. The Lord helps those who are thoroughly committed to his interests and who take up the challenge to be an overcomer. Thank God for those who overcame in days of prosperity. Thank God for those who overcome in days of weakness. May it be our portion for his namesake.