

God's Instructions for His Holy People
Historical Background of Judges: Part 1

1. Can you recall a rule, made by your parents and which seemed ridiculous at the time, that you are thankful you obeyed?

In the first chapter of Judges, Israel seems to be making great strides in the conquest of the Promised Land—that is, until you consider how God prepared them for this mission. We need to compare God's commands before they entered the land with the kind of obedience we find the people displaying in the book of Judges. As God's chosen people, Israel's obedience or disobedience created far-reaching consequences for them and the world they were supposed to be influencing.

To make this comparison, we need to examine Israel's history. How did Israel become God's chosen people? How did their lack of obedience in carrying out God's commands cause them to be in the condition we find them, here in the book of Judges? A condensed history of Israel is recorded below—you will need to dig for the rest. It is helpful to note that the Israelites fighting in Judges 1 are the children of the slaves redeemed to freedom at the first Passover in Egypt.

It will take us three weeks to set the stage for our study so that our understanding of Judges will be enhanced. Although you may be anxious to jump right into Judges, do these studies as unto the Lord, for He has incredible truths in them that will help you live your life for Him.

Stop and Pray - God, show me how You prepared Your people for victory. Open my eyes to all the instructions You give to assist me in getting the enemies out of my life and in setting up my life as a holy witness of You to my world.

How did Israel come to be enslaved in Egypt? Once upon a time, God chose a man named Abraham to whom He revealed Himself. God called Abraham to leave his country and travel to a country He would show him. God led Abraham to the land of Canaan. In Genesis 15:1-20, God made a covenant with Abraham in which He promised to give him a seed and a land (Canaan, the Promised Land), and to grow his offspring up into a mighty nation through which the whole world would be blessed. Part of this process would require his family to be enslaved and mistreated in Egypt for 400 years, after which God would punish Egypt and bring Abraham's family out with great reward.

Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac fathered Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel. Israel had twelve sons. Prior to this 400-year sojourn in Egypt, Genesis records that Israel and his twelve sons were continually being drawn into the Canaanite culture, which was severely immoral and idolatrous. Israel's family needed to be removed from Canaanite temptations if they were to survive.

God used sibling rivalry to establish one of Israel's sons, Joseph, as a governor in Egypt in charge of storing food for an upcoming famine. Israel's family journeyed to Egypt when they ran out of food in Canaan. Joseph was there to welcome them with open arms, plenty of food, and the choicest property in Egypt as a gift from the Pharaoh to Joseph's family (Genesis 50:20; 45:4-7, 17-18). Jacob was hesitant to leave the Promised Land, but God assured him in Genesis 46:3-4 by saying, "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again." God used Egypt to preserve Israel's family during the great famine. He was also going to use living in Egypt to grow them into a great nation. How was God going to do it? His methods are unexpected.

Over the course of the famine, the Egyptians were reduced to servitude (Genesis 47:20-21) while the Israelites acquired property and multiplied greatly, becoming exceedingly numerous (Genesis 47:27; Exodus 1:6-7). A new Pharaoh, who did not know Joseph, became fearful of Israel's numbers and enslaved them. Because the Israelites feared God, however, they became even more numerous (Exodus 1:8-20).

Slavery? Is this your method for growing a mighty nation, God? Yes! Slavery shut off the Hebrew nation from interaction with the rest of the world. A family that was originally drawn into pagan culture at every turn was now set apart in a situation that finds them severely oppressed but rigorously growing nonetheless. God was working out the promises made to Abraham and Jacob (Genesis 15 and 46). The Hebrews were left to themselves to create their own unique heritage and culture so that when God brought them out of slavery, Abraham's family would have an identity as a Hebrew nation.

During this 400 years of slavery, God silently sustained and increased the Hebrew nation. There is no record of God speaking to or interacting with Israel during this time. After 400 years of watching Egypt worship dozens of gods while the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was silent, God commissioned Moses to instruct Pharaoh to let God's people go. Moses obeyed, but Pharaoh responded, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2).

God had told Moses this would happen. God was going to use Pharaoh's stubbornness to show Moses (Exodus 6:1), the Hebrews (Exodus 6:6-8; 10:1-4), the Egyptians (Exodus 7:3-5; 8:22; 9:13-16), and the surrounding nations (Exodus 18:1, 7-12; Numbers 33:3-4) that He was the *only* God so that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Every plague that came upon Egypt proved Pharaoh and Egypt's gods to be impotent.

The Hebrews needed to remain in Egypt and witness these plagues to understand the power of the God who was calling them to be set apart to Him as a holy priesthood to the world. They needed to witness the power of the God who was going to sustain them through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. If they were going to be witnesses of God to the world, they needed to fear Him, to follow Him, to learn about Him, and to tell others about Him. Had they simply been set free, would they have turned to God or would they have moved on to enjoy their freedom without thought of God or His purpose for them?

When the people were prepared, God kept His promise and freed Israel. After 400 years of silence, God entered the scene and proved Himself powerful. His final plague took the lives of Egypt's first-born. He required the sacrifice of a perfect lamb to prevent the angel of death from taking the lives of the firstborn of the Hebrew families. The Hebrews followed God's instructions and were spared. Finally Pharaoh freed the Hebrews from slavery, and they came out with great reward just as God had promised (Exodus 11; 12:1-13).

As we read through the rest of Exodus, we see the newly freed Hebrews, who had so recently witnessed awesome miracles of God, complaining and fearing that God would not take care of them and would abandon them to die in the desert. After being mistreated their whole lives, do they dare even hope that life can get better? God seems good, but do they dare trust Him? Will God become silent and abandon them again?

Empathizing with their fears and doubts, God continually showed them why they should trust Him. He led them, fed them, sheltered them, and fought for them. Everything that God did prior to the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai gave the Hebrew nation reason to want to be in a covenant relationship with God. When God offers to bind Himself to Israel, they jump at the chance. What was this covenant all about? What were the terms and why was Israel so ready to commit to it? Was God specific in asking for Israel's obedience or did He give vague laws with lots of room for personal interpretation? Now is where you will start digging.

Note: We will look at Exodus and Deuteronomy to get the full picture. Deuteronomy records the second giving of the law and reiterates the law found in Exodus.

2. What did you learn about Israel's history that you did not know before?

3. What did God require of Israel to be in this particular covenant relationship with Him?
Deuteronomy 28:1

Exodus 19:5

4. What was God trying to achieve by having Israel bound to His law? After reading each passage several times, record your answers; then summarize it all in "Put it all together" on the next page.
Exodus 19:5-6

Leviticus 19:2

Deuteronomy 4:5-8

Deuteronomy 5:29, 32-33

Put it all together—

Read “Covenant—what does it mean?” on page 7 for additional insight.

Read Exodus 23:20-33, Deuteronomy 7:12-26; 28:1-14.

5. What part of the Mosaic Law would have made them eagerly agree to put themselves under this new set of laws rather than cling to their newfound freedom?

6. What could have deterred them from entering into this covenant (Deuteronomy 28:15-68)? (After studying Judges, these descriptions will sound familiar.)

7. What was Israel’s response to God’s offer (Exodus 24:3, 7)?

8. The Israelites began breaking the covenant before God had finished writing it (Exodus 32:1-6). Read Deuteronomy 31:16-22. Did God know they would break the covenant?

9. If God foreknew their actions, why would He include so many curses for breaking it? Remember God is good and God is love, therefore, the curses must be good and loving. God must have a goal in including the curses. What will the curses produce in the people under them that is necessary for life with God? See Deuteronomy 30:1-10.

The story continues... After they entered into the covenant with God, God gave Israel instructions for building His tabernacle so that He could dwell among them (Exodus 25:8, 22; 29:42-46). He also directed their path (Numbers 9:15-23). By moving the camp repeatedly and unexpectedly, God trained Israel to follow and trust His leadership. After giving Israel His law and specifics about what to do when they entered the land, God led Israel to the border of the Promised Land. Spies were then sent into the land to bring back a report about the people, the land, and the cities.

Read Numbers 14.

10. After hearing the bittersweet report of the ten spies and the confident report of Caleb, what was the Israelites' predicament?

11. Was their choice between believing the ten spies and believing Caleb a valid dilemma (Exodus 23:20-32)? Support your answer.

12. Have you ever found yourself in a similar dilemma? What was it? What choice did you make? What was the outcome?

13. God was understandably upset with Israel's unbelief in light of all He had already done for them. After Moses pleads with God to maintain His reputation with the surrounding nations by sparing Israel from destruction, what was God's ultimate decision regarding Israel's unbelief?

14. What can we learn about God from His decision to deal with Israel's unbelief in this way?

15. What did Israel do after hearing God's verdict on their unbelief? What was the outcome of their actions?

16. Whenever God puts you in a place to refine you to a new level of faith in Him, what should your attitude be? Why?

Final thoughts: The Hebrews were stuck between fear of their enemies and faith in God. They chose to yield to that fear rather than have faith in God. God had promised to give them victory no matter how big the enemy. Because of Israel's response in this situation, God decided to keep them in the desert for forty more years (Numbers 13-14). God will train them more thoroughly before they can be His holy priesthood to the world.

God has promised to give you victory over your enemies, too! Will you put your faith in Him? Or will you live in fear of the enemy, not possessing the spiritual life that God has promised you?

Pray – God, I believe in You. Help my unbelief. In You and by You, I can conquer any enemy.

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Covenant – What does it mean?

In biblical times, covenants were very common, unlike today. We have encountered different types in our study—unconditional and conditional. The Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 15) was unconditional. God said, “I will...no matter what you do.” The Mosaic Covenant that we are studying in this lesson was conditional. God said, “If you will...then I will....” These two types of covenants were understood by those bound to them. They recognized the seriousness of the commitment and entered into the covenant with full understanding.

In the covenant between Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel 18:1-5, you see them exchanging coats, weapons, and belts, and then making a vow. These items were symbolic of what the covenant partners bound themselves to. Coats represented an exchange of identities. This meant that what I own, you now own; what you owe, I now owe. They were dying to their own independent living and choosing to live always in consideration of the other, and the covenant they made. They were agreeing to take on the image of the covenant partner—the two became one. The exchange of weapons represented their covenantal obligation to defend one another against their enemies. If my covenant partner needed help defending himself against an enemy, I would have no choice but to help him, even if it would make me fight against those close to me, or threaten my life to do so. The exchange of belts represented the agreement to be each other’s strength. The belt held the ammunition. Therefore, the exchange of the belts represented that when you have no strength of your own, I am bound to be your strength for you and to come to your aid, no matter what sacrifice it requires of me.

To bind themselves to a covenant, there would often be a sacrifice and a vow made between the partners. In the Abrahamic covenant, you see Abraham cutting animals into two pieces and making a pathway between them. God then passed between the pieces while making a promise to Abraham, thus sealing the covenant. In the Mosaic covenant, the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the altar (representing God) and also on the Israelites. Thus, the two parties bound themselves together in a covenant. The blood symbolized that if the covenant was broken by either party, they were calling upon God to “do so to me as has been done to this animal, if I break this covenant.” In other words, “God, kill me if I break this covenant.” All of the above was common knowledge and widely accepted in biblical times. The Hebrews knew what it meant to enter into such a solemn binding covenant when they accepted God’s goals in binding Israel to himself, and also of the blessings and curses you will now study.