

FAILING
PEOPLE
—♦—
FAITHFUL
GOD

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The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, Editor

Failing People, Faithful God: Judges and Ruth

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Contents



Lesson 1	Understanding Narratives	7
Lesson 2	Israel's Report Card	17
Lesson 3	Spiraling out of Control	27
Lesson 4	God's Hand at Work	37
Lesson 5	A Woman with Contagious Faith	45
Lesson 6	Gideon's Fearing Problem	53
Lesson 7	Israel's Need for a Righteous King	63
Lesson 8	God, the Judge, Sees All	73
Lesson 9	God, Sovereign over All	83
Lesson 10	Samson's "I" Problem	91
Lesson 11	Israel's Need for Shiloh	101
Lesson 12	God's Faithful Provision of Redemption	111
Lesson 13	A Serious Responsibility	119

Preface

The story of Judges is one that is overwhelmingly dark. Israel failed God miserably by breaking their Covenant with Him. They neglected to possess the entire Promised Land and turned away from God to serve idols. In the end, they created their own religion based on bits of Judaism, lots of paganism, superstitions, and greed. If we weren't careful, we could study Judges and conclude that life is hopeless.

But throughout the book of Judges is sprinkled testimonies to God's faithfulness to His people. Those testimonies shine like bright stars in the night sky. They remind us that God will never stop being faithful.

Ultimately, Israel needed a king to direct their lives. Specifically, they needed Jesus, the King of Kings. The book of Ruth helps us see God's sovereign plan to provide Israel with her King. Eventually God did send His Son to die for the sins of the world. And at some point in the future, Jesus will return to set up His Kingdom in Israel. He will rule His people with righteous. They will be redeemed and will worship and serve Him with gladness.

The hope in the books of Judges and Ruth translates to us today. We can rely on our faithful God to never change and to always keep His promises. And we can look forward with great anticipation to Jesus coming again.

Understanding Narratives

▶ Scripture Focus

Judges and Ruth

Theme

The books of Judges and Ruth are written in narrative styles that help us understand the books.

Memory Verse

“Take good heed therefore unto yourselves, that ye love the LORD your God” (Joshua 23:11).

GETTING STARTED

Read directions carefully before using.

For some people, reading the directions on how to use a new product never occurs to them. Why waste time reading when there is a job to do?

1. Do you read the directions on how to use a new product, or do you prefer to learn by trial and error?

2. When have you experienced bad consequences from not reading the directions on how to use a product?

3. What might be some consequences of diving right into a study of Judges and Ruth without getting some direction on how to read and interpret the books?

This lesson will give you a frame of reference for understanding Judges and Ruth so you can apply them properly.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Narratives convey historical events in the form of stories. Some might think that the word “story” should not be used to describe a Biblical account. That’s because they associate the word “story” with fictional writing. But the word can also be used to describe a creative telling of true events. Judges and Ruth are true stories written in this fashion. So learning more about narratives is necessary to properly understand Judges and Ruth.

Narratives include setting, plot, characters, and rhetorical devices. Each of those common elements help us follow and understand the story, but they are not an end in themselves. They are tools to convey a point. We should ultimately focus on the point of a narrative rather than getting bogged down in the minute details of a particular scene.

Setting

A narrative’s setting is three-pronged. The first prong is the physical setting. The reader should consider the physical places and landmarks mentioned in the story as well as the objects or physical activities that are important to the story.

Second, a narrative’s setting includes cultural elements. The reader must be aware of the cultural customs as well as any of the underlying values and beliefs that influence the story. This helps the reader separate a cultural norm from a Biblically prescribed practice.

4. Read Ruth 3:1–7. What cultural custom did Ruth perform in this passage?

Obviously a woman seeking a husband should not follow Naomi's directions. Ruth's actions help us understand the bigger point of the book of Ruth, but they are not a prescription for today.

Third, a narrative's setting involves the temporal setting, or what is happening in the world in which the story takes place. The political situation is important to know on a local, national, and even international level. During the period of the judges, Israel was living under God's rule. They didn't have a human king to lead them. God determined their pattern for living. He carried out His rule according to the Covenants He made with them at different times prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. The Covenants influenced and defined Israel's relationship with God. Being aware of them is important to interpreting Judges correctly.

A covenant is an ancient Near East tool for legally regulating relationships between individuals and nations. The Covenants God established, or cut, were similar to those between a king and his people. A key factor in such Covenants is determining with whom rests the responsibility to fulfill the terms of the covenant. In the Abrahamic Covenant, God took sole responsibility for fulfilling the Covenant (Gen. 15:7–17). He personally guaranteed Abraham land (12:1, 2; 15:18), a blessing on all the nations (12:3), and descendants (15:1–6). All these were eternal promises (17:7, 8, 13, 19). Nothing Abraham or anyone after him could do would nullify the Abrahamic Covenant. In the days of the judges, Israel could look to the Abrahamic Covenant with confidence and as a reason to trust God and serve Him exclusively.

After the Exodus, God gave the Mosaic Covenant to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 15). The Covenant starts in Exodus 19 and runs through Deuteronomy 28. God gave the Children of Israel His commandments concerning how to live, worship, and relate to one another. In contrast to the Abrahamic Covenant, the responsibility for keeping the Mosaic Covenant included Israel. The Covenant blessings were conditional on Israel's obedience. Throughout the period of the judges the Lord blessed the nation's obedience and disciplined the nation's disobedience in accordance with the Mosaic Covenant.

The books of Judges and Ruth are presented from the perspective of God's covenant relationship with Israel. Judges recounts the tension between the promise of the Lord to give land and the failure of the nation to obey the commands of the Lord so they could occupy and enjoy rest in the land.

The Lord enlisted the oppressive nations living within the boundaries

of the Promised Land to motivate His people (Judg. 3:1–5). Those nations included the Philistines, Canaanites, Sidonians, and Hivites.

5. Read Judges 3:1. For what did God use the nations living inside Israel's borders?

God drove the enemy from the Promised Land when Israel put their faith in Him.

Surrounding Israel were sovereign nations who lived independent of any world power. Those people groups included the Amalekites, Edomites, Midianites, Moabites, Ammonites, Arameans (Syrians), Phoenicians, and Mesopotamians. All of those groups were hostile to Israel to some degree. We will see in the course of our study that several of them were involved in direct conflicts with Israel.

Plot

Narratives also have plot. A plot is simply the sequence of events that either bring the conflict to a resolution or end with the conflict unresolved. A narrative's plot steers the reader's thinking to the book's major themes. We will learn in the coming lessons that the plot in Judges steers us to the theme that God is always faithful. He never fails to keep His promises and complete His word. He demonstrated that He is worthy of Israel's complete trust. The plot in Judges will also reveal there wasn't a permanent solution to the problem of sin and its consequences during the time of the judges. Each judge delivered Israel from an oppressor, but each time Israel subsequently sinned again and needed another deliverer. The book ends with the conflict between Israel and God unresolved.

Overall, Israel's failures in Judges prepare the reader for the introduction of a king in 1 Samuel, and more specifically, for the introduction of king David, Israel's second ruler. God made a covenant with king David (2 Sam. 7:10–16). It included God's promise that David's Seed will rule forever on David's throne. The promise gives hope and shines brightly against the dark days of the judges.

6. Read 1 Samuel 7:15, 16. Why was it necessary for God to make the Davidic Covenant unconditional, meaning it was not dependent on anything anyone did?

The book of Judges showed that Israel needed a king. The history that followed, starting with 1 Samuel, showed they needed the King of Kings. God's Son was their only hope of ever fully realizing the promises in their Covenants with God.

The dark days of the judges ultimately points us ahead to the time when Christ came to be the once-for-all solution to sin. He is the only judge, or deliverer, Who offers a permanent solution to sin. He will give Israel a new heart in fulfillment of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–33). He will reign as king on the throne of David and will finally completely eradicate sin as He ushers in eternity. His Kingdom will be forever. The cycles of sin, like those in Judges, will be remembered no more.

The book of Ruth is a strong complement to the book of Judges. Ruth's plot steers the reader toward the themes of love and redemption. The book presents a touching picture of Christ's love for and redemption of humanity as the plot moves along to a triumphant resolution. The light and hope that is dim in Judges is bright in Ruth. It is a refreshing book to study on the heels of Judges.

Characters

All narratives include characters. One of the characters is always God, though sometimes God is represented either by a prophet or another character. As we interpret narratives, it is important to remember that they are primarily about God. That does not mean we cannot benefit from the characters' examples. Their lives do offer illustrations of what happens when people put their faith in God.

7. Read 1 Corinthians 10:11. What does this verse say about the value of some Old Testament characters?

8. Read Romans 15:4. What value comes from Old Testament Scriptures?

We need to exercise caution when making an application from an Old Testament character's life. If we focus too much on what the human character is doing or not doing, then we might miss the narrative's primary purpose of revealing God's character and ways. We might also miss the more general truths the narrative reveals about humanity. Furthermore, the Old Testament characters in particular often made their decisions in settings and times that are quite different from our own; therefore, drawing direct applications from their lives is sometimes impossible.

What a character's story reveals about God and His relationship with humanity should be our primary focus. For example, when we study Samson's life, concentrating on what his stories teach us about God will yield a clearer application than trying to sort out which of his actions were moral. Hebrews 11 takes this approach to Samson's life.

9. Read Hebrews 11:32–34. How were Samson and the other judges able to do great things for God?

Old Testament characters pleased God and did great things for Him when they acted by faith. So their major contribution to our lives is an encouragement to live by faith in God.

Point of View

Every narrative also has a point of view. A point of view is simply the vantage point from which a story is told. Most often the point of view in a narrative is a narrator who is aware of the characters' actions, thoughts, and sometimes even their motives.

The narrator usually makes use of the characters' dialogue to make the primary point in a narrative. Often the characters' key statements come at or near the narrative's climax. Sometimes the characters will sing a reflective song or recite poetry to capture the key point of the narrative. Remember to study those poems and songs carefully. They are not something added to the narrative. Often they contain the lesson the narrative is meant to convey.

10. Read Judges 5:31. What key point did Deborah capture in the final section of her song of praise to God?

Paying attention to a narrative's point of view helps us steer clear of making applications based on surface issues in the narrative. It also keeps us from laying claim to blessings or promises that are forced into the narrative.

Rhetorical Device—Repetition

Narratives also make use of rhetorical devices. Rhetorical devices serve to highlight what the writer wanted the reader to notice.

Repetition is a rhetorical device that is easy to miss. Any repeated words, phrases, images, or themes in a narrative should grab our attention. In Judges there are three repeated phrases that help us understand the point of the book: *In those days there was no king in Israel* (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), *the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord* (2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1), and *every man did that which was right in his own eyes* (17:6; 21:25). For the original readers of Judges, these phrases jumped off the page. They should for us too.

This course will examine the repeated phrases more closely. But for now we should know that the phrases reveal Israel's need for the Deliverer Who is better than the judges God raised up to help Israel. Jesus Christ is the better deliverer. He came to earth to die for the sins of the world. When He returns someday to set up His Kingdom, He will rule by His righteousness. He won't have any character flaws, and it will be impossible for Him to make a poor decision.

As believers we will take part in Christ's Kingdom. So while the repeated phrases are a rather dark commentary on times of the judges, they should create in us an anticipation of Christ's future earthly Kingdom.

Rhetorical Device—Chiasm

Another rhetorical device is chiasm. Chiasm helps the reader identify the focal point of a narrative. See the example below of a common chiastic structure. A and A' are similar scenes as are B and B'. C is the focal point of the narrative.

A - Scene

B - Scene

C - Focal scene

B' - Scene

A' - Scene

Unfortunately, there isn't a notation in the Biblical manuscripts that

announce the beginning, middle, and end of a chiasm. Thus we have to read carefully to identify them and be cautious not to force them into a narrative.

Scholars have identified chiasm in Judges. Many put the pivot of the book at the story of Gideon. The beginning of Gideon's story reveals his lack of faith to take God at His word. When God called Gideon to attack the mighty Midianites, Gideon's first reaction was to doubt and fear. He tried to deal with his doubt and fear by having God give him signs (6:11–40). God indulged Gideon with the signs but then yanked the rug out from under him by reducing his army down to three hundred men (7:1–8). It wasn't until Gideon heard God's promise of victory from the mouth of his enemy that he finally trusted God. Gideon's faith forms the pinnacle and pivot point of the book.

11. Read Judges 7:15–18. What evidence is there of Gideon's belief in God?

The problem with Israel in the period of the judges was their lack of faith in the promises of God and their subsequent turning from Him to worship false gods. Having judges did not ultimately change or curb their unbelief. Gideon's sinful post-victory decisions make that clear as do the lessening quality of the judges that followed him.

What Israel needed was a king, but not just any king. It wasn't until God gave His people David, a king after His own heart, that Israel began to realize more fully the benefits of the Covenants. But even David had his faults. Israel won't experience the full benefits of God's promises to them until Jesus, the Son of David, sits on Israel's throne as the King of Kings.

12. How much have you paid attention to the aspects of narratives as you've read Scripture?

13. Why is it important to be aware of the aspects of Biblical narratives?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

14. What new perspective on the book of Judges do you have as a result of this lesson?
15. How has this lesson affected your desire to study Judges and Ruth?
16. The Old Testament Scriptures are profitable to us, but only as we are willing to persevere in our study of them (Rom. 15:4). As we persevere, God will provide the strength and grace to grow spiritually through His Word.
17. What have you learned from this lesson about the need to read books of the Bible carefully?
18. How will this lesson affect your approach to this study?