

Judges Chapters 2-3- John Karmelich

1. My single word title for this section is "Overture". If you've ever seen a musical play, often before the curtain rises, the orchestra will play an overture of the music that will be sung in that play. It's done to help the audience grow accustomed to the type of music they'll be hearing in that play. It is the perfect title because these two chapters read like an "overture" of what the book of Judges is all about. If that's true, why not have this in Chapter 1? Because the first chapter was examples of the type of obedience God desires and the consequences of failing to live as He desires. Once that "tone" of how God expects us to live is understood, that's the orchestra's cue to "hit it". It's as if Chapter 1 said, "Here's what God demands and despite that fact, here's how His people acted in spite of the knowledge of what He desires. With that established in Chapter 1, Chapters 2 to 3 give us the "overture" of the rest of the book. As an example, Chapter 2 repeats a final part of the book of Joshua as if to say here's how Israel went from their high point of complete obedience to the rock bottom of totally ignoring God. The overture effectively teaches, "Here's what we are to expect for the rest of the book of Judges, so get used to a lot of disobedience here!"
2. OK John, before you give us any details, hit us with the "Why should be care lecture" and make it good! If I had to describe a single purpose for the book of Judges it's to teach us what's the cost of disobedience to God. I'm not talking about salvation, but about the failure to live as a witness for Him. It's the danger of thinking, "I'm saved, I can now go do whatever I want, and I'll wait until I am in heaven to figure out what to say to Jesus!" Of course as Christians we're free to go do what we want, the issue is what do we want to do? Do we want to use our time just for our own things or do we care about being a living witness for God? I'm not saying we have to drop whatever we are doing now and go to church. I'm saying our lives are always a living witness for Him and we need to keep that in mind as we go through our day. Studying the book of Judges will remind us that there's a price to pay in this lifetime for ignoring God. A reason this book will get gross is the price we pay for ignoring God in effect leads to a gross life. We'll get a prime example of that here in the text of these chapters. Speaking of which, let me go over them:
 - a) Chapter 2 reads like a summary of the whole book. It discusses the death of Joshua and it repeats some of the facts of his death at the end of that book. It opens with a speech by an angel of all things. It's as if an angel is the narrator saying, "Here's how you're blowing it!" Then the angel says in effect, "Because you're messing up badly, here's the consequences!"
 - b) Did God know they were going to mess up? I believe in a God who knows all things. I'd argue this is all part of His plan. When we fail to live as He desires, He works on our level to do what it takes to draw us back to Him. That includes letting us suffer because we did turn from Him. It's like God saying, "You don't want Me in your life? OK then, watch the consequences unfold before you!"
 - c) Because the angel somehow made this announcement publicly, we read of the Israelites at that point making a sacrifice to God. As every parent knows, it's one thing when our kids say their sorry to avoid punishment and it's another when they show real repentance. One of the patterns we see in this book is, "OK God, sorry we ignored You, please help us. We are desperate for Your help!" Then once that help comes, the Israelites go back to living as however they wanted to and ignored God. The book of Judges teaches the downhill spiral of what happens when we ignore God and things go from worse to worse. Well watch the Israelites only repent long enough for the suffering to stop and don't really change!
 - i) OK John, now that you've scared us half to death, what do we do? Pray for Him to guide our lives and make it obvious what is His will for us right now. Then go do whatever is the logical next step realizing God's a part of our life. It's about doing the right thing realizing that our lives are a living witness for Him. It's that simple and the consequences of failing to do that is the main topic of this book. Speaking of which, let me get back to summarizing these two chapters.

- d) After the angel speech the "overture" backs up to explain the fact that Joshua and all those leaders who were part of the effort to conquer this land are now dead. It's like the passing of the baton from one generation to the other. It's like when we realize we've grown up, so we can't depend upon our parents anymore. The reason we get this "history overture" is a reminder that when this next generation turned from God, they now got no one to blame but themselves, as again "the baton has been past". Therefore, most of Chapter 2 describes how the Israelites suffered at the hands of their enemies because they failed to be a living witness for God. Again, it's the reminder that our actions have consequences.
 - e) Let me ask another tough question: I'm sure innocent people suffered when they failed to live as God desired. That's one reason why they're constantly crying out to God to help in this book. So if He can cause all this damage to them and to us, why do we turn from Him in the first place? Truthfully, it is the simple fact that temptation is well, tempting! When we choose to sin we fail to see is all the innocent people who get hurt by those choices. As a simple example, think of all those families who suffer when one member regularly turns to drugs or alcohol. My simple point is none of us live in a vacuum and the bad decisions we make affect those around us.
 - f) So why is God so tough on them in this book? To teach them and us what it really costs to turn our lives from living as He desires. God allows innocent people to suffer and as all of know, if there was no eternity, this life would be very unfair. Now that I beat that point to death, I can quickly discuss Chapter 3 as well. Here we go:
3. In Chapter 3 we get the first few judges that God used to help the Israelites. They have faults like you and me, as we'll see in this book. I still consider Chapter 3 as the overture, as the stories here are pretty good examples of what we'll read through the rest of this book. Remember an overture is the musical score of an entire play or opera. The judges here in this chapter are good examples of the more detailed stories we'll get later in this book. We'll soon get to more famous characters like Gideon and Sampson. By giving us short stories in Chapter 3 of men (and women later) used by God, we're getting the "overture" of what's coming up in this book!
- a) OK a few details about Chapter 3 and we'll begin the details. The chapter opens by telling us that the Israelites started their downhill slide by marrying women from the groups that God called them to wipe out. Obviously, it's an example of compromise with what God is calling us to do. The issue isn't who we marry. The issue is who we worship as God based on how we live our lives. The text says from those mixed marriages, the Israelites started to worship the local deities. The point for you and me is when we start messing with the things God wants us to avoid, the consequences of those choices becomes apparent.
 - b) Then the pattern begins that we see in the book. The Israelites complain about their pain and cry out to God. He rescues them because what God desires is a relationship with all people who turn to Him. Anyway, the first judge named Othniel, was used by God as to defeat their enemies then the Israelites had peace for forty years.
 - c) Then of course the Israelites got comfortable in their success and ignored God. That leads to the next judge a man named Ehud. (There is no quiz on the names!) The short version is he stabs and kills a fat king who was oppressing the Israelites. (Gruesome details to be told in this lesson!) The final verse of Chapter 3 is one verse about a man named Shamgar who we'll discover has great marshal arts skills and God raised up to be a judge in Israel.
4. Again the big picture is the fact that the pattern that is common in history: People seek God and are willing to do what it takes to please Him. Then they get comfortable based on the way He has blessed them. Then in their comfort people turn from God and it's necessary to remind people of just who's in charge anyway! The punishments get progressively worse as if God's asking, "What do I have to do to get obedience?" The answer for you and me is to take time daily to seek Him to make Him a part of our lives and then trust in His power to guide us to use our lives so we make a difference for Him. Yes it's hard work. Yes it requires focus. The point is if we're trusting Him, we can overcome the horrid pattern we read in this book and through history.

5. OK enough of that, time to begin: Chapter 2, Verse 1: The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said
- a) Before I get into what the angel said, let me discuss who this angel is and why he traveled from Gilgal to Bokim (as opposed from say, "heaven to earth").
 - b) Let's start with the obvious question: Why have an angel appear here and now? This is so God could communicate to the Israelites in a way that wouldn't frighten them to death. A visual appearance of an angel is scary enough. It's probably the best way for God to show up in a way that the Israelites got the fact that God Himself is communicating with them.
 - c) Many scholars argue that when the Old Testament says "The" angel of the Lord, that is an appearance of Jesus in the Old Testament. Remember that the Christian story is about the fact that God became man. My point is Jesus always existed. Can I prove this is Jesus? Of course not, but many scholars lean that way, and I hold that view as well.
 - d) That leads to the question whether this is Jesus or just an angel, why does the text specify the travel from Gilgal to Bokim? Why not say the angel came down from heaven? It is to teach the Israelites about how God blesses them when they're living as He desires. Let me give the details:
 - i) Gilgal is essentially the place the Israelites first camped when they crossed into the land of Israel. The angel (again, who I'd say is Jesus in a pre-incarnate appearance) is making the point that God is with them as they enter the land.
 - ii) This leads to the important difference between "Salvation and Blessing". For God's salvation, it's about the trust that He already paid for all our sins. Blessing is about living in obedience to His desires. The underlying message we're about to get is a message of "Wow, are you guys blowing it big time!" OK then, back to the angel.
 - iii) The next thing He says is he came to Bokim. The word means "place of weeping". I don't know the exact spot in Israel, but what I'm sure it means is the angel wants to communicate the fact they're messing up badly, and God will turn His back on them "so to speak" because the Israelites have turned their collective backs on God and are failing to live as He desires.
 - iv) With that said, it's time for the angel to recite the "overture" theme to Judges:
6. Verse 1 cont.: "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, ² and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? ³ Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."
- a) To begin, it's important to understand the difference between a "one-way" contract versus a "two-way" contract. A "one way" contract is that "Party A" will do this, no matter what, and it's not conditional on anything. A "two way" contract is "You do this and I'll do that".
 - i) I bring this up, because both are in play here. The one-way contract is about God promising to give the land of Israel to the Israelites. After thousands of years and a lot of interruptions, they're still there. The interruptions are part of the "two way" contract. Let me explain:
 - ii) God's blessing is based on obedience. Yes that applies to Christians as well. That's why God kicked the Israelites out of that land several times in history. He did that as a way of saying, "I don't know what else to do. I want a relationship with all of you! However, that relationship's always on My terms, not your terms." Therefore God had to punish them to get their attention. When they still refused to turn back to God, He has to do the desperate thing and kick them out of there for a while! In effect that's what these verses are all about. God's "dilemma". That dilemma has to do with the enforcement of both the "one-way" and the "two-way" contracts! That's why God had to do what He did in order for His people to live as He desired, that is a witness for Him to the world around them!

- iii) OK John that's neat. What does that have to do with you and me? Everything. We should never assume we Christians are "off the hook" just because we are not His chosen people (The Israelites). This gets back to my standard issue of "Now what". Now that we've committed our lives to believing Jesus is in charge of our lives, yes as well as dying for all our sins and is God, the big question is what do we do now with that fact? The "now what" is to live under the guidelines of His laws and use our lives as a witness for Him. In effect the book of Judges is here to teach us what are the consequences when we fail to live that way. Speaking of Judges....
 - b) As we read through this book and especially this chapter, get "chronology" out of mind, in terms of thinking this book always follows a specific time order. This chapter gives us the big picture of the Israelites disobedience. So if that's true, are we reading a literal event of an angel giving this speech? When did it occur? I suspect it was literal and truthfully it is a story that could happen at the end of the book or even after a generation had lived there in that land. The point is this tragic story repeats itself essentially for 350 years so it could have happened just about anytime in this books time span. If I had to guess, this speech is given to the second generation saying how they're blowing it! The lesson for us of course, is about the danger of "blowing it" and God's desire we turn back to Him!
 - c) With that said, catch some of the details. God called on the Israelites to wipe them out as well as destroy their altars to their false gods. Their failure to do that will end up being a problem for many hundreds of years, even after the Judges period ends. If you ever want a motivation to live as God desires, it's more than just us, it affects others around us too!
 - d) OK enough of all of that. Time to see the results of the angel's speech:
7. Verse 4: When the angel of the LORD had spoken these things to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud,⁵ and they called that place Bokim. There they offered sacrifices to the LORD.
- a) We can debate all day about when chronologically in this story, the angel spoke to all the Israelites or even where Bokim is located. All we can focus upon is what we do know. It had to be some time when all the Israelites gathered. Most likely one of the holidays that's ordained in the books of Moses. Whatever the actual name of this gathering place is, none of us know, we just know it was called Bokim, which means "place of weeping". It's one of those times where everyone knows they blew it badly. The question is, did they weep as a "child caught with his hand in the cookie jar", or did they really desire to change to live as God desired they lived? Given the fact that the book of Judges described the Israelites as a group of people all doing "essentially whatever they wanted to do", I suspect in spite of this warning from God, it wasn't a real repentance.
 - b) That leads to a quick discussion of what is repentance. First, we need to separate the issue of salvation from living as God desires. I beat to death the idea that salvation is only about us trusting in what God did for us. The issue in focus here is living as God desired. For us to repent, means to truly change one's way of living. What about when we mess up? That is when we confess again. The issue is are we trying, or are we making the "Got my hand caught in the cookie jar" so I must confess type of repentance.
 - c) The text mentions the Israelites offering sacrifices to God. Even that is not an indication of a true repentance. It could be, "I was caught so let me suffer my punishment so I can then continue with my life as it is". We don't know for sure. Since the book pretty much states that they didn't change, I suspect it's the former. The issue for you and me is do we desire God to bless our lives? That's where true repentance comes in and a desire to live as God desires we live. That's the key point here.
 - d) Let's be honest, if a large group of Christians were gathered somewhere, and somehow an angel showed up and essentially chewed us all out, we'd be weeping too, and we'd do our own version of a sacrifice. There is no magic formula for Christians to do "this" and we're now forgiven. It's about making the effort daily to live as God desires and seek Him with the attitude that He's in charge of our lives, not us. OK then, we can move on.

8. Verse 6: After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to his own inheritance.⁷ The people served the sLORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel.
- a) At this point we're "backtracking". The book of Joshua records his death at the end of that book. So why repeat some of those facts here in the book of Judges? The answer has to do with my "overture" theme. This is God saying in effect, "They started so well. It's amazing how far they've fallen in such a short time span!". The text is reminding us that during the time Joshua was alive and the elders who had seen God work in getting the Israelites into that land were alive, they did well. But the next generation blew it badly.
 - b) So why's that? Why is it we can teach our children all about our success and failure and a big "blew it" scene is coming? First let's be honest, "sin is tempting" no matter the age. We also have to realize that often people have to learn the hard way for themselves. Did God know all of this? Of course. A key reason the book of Judges was written for us is so we see what are the consequences not only to us of sin, but to others around us as well as the children who come after us. Anyway, the "overture" section is going to state strongly how the Israelites started well and went downhill from there. Let's continue:
9. Verse 8: Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten.⁹ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.
- a) Recall for a second that Joshua was called by God in a mighty way. He wasn't part of the Messianic line. He was from a different tribe. He was Moses' personal assistant and was called by God to be the next leader of the Israelites after Moses. Personally I always felt a little sorry for Joshua as I can imagine how tough that must have been to have to follow a legend like Moses. Still God used Joshua in a mighty way. If nothing else, it teaches us if we have to "follow a legend", that doesn't mean that God can't use us in a great way too.
 - b) I recall many years ago, I read about George Bush "Senior" (the first Bush President) did a study of the children of American Presidents. The short version is there was a lot of horrid stories as the children had guilt complexes of trying to "top dad". My point here is if we're called to "follow a legend", it doesn't mean that God can't also use us in a great way even if it's not like God worked on who came before us. In the case of Joshua, he didn't do the same things that Moses did, but that isn't what God called Joshua to do. He was called to lead the Israelites into the land and conquer it. A lot of that was done in his lifetime. We get the epilogue stated here that Joshua was buried on a plot of land allotted to him when the land of Israel was divided up tribe by tribes.
 - c) OK, enough of the positive history. It's time for the bad news.
10. Verse 10: After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel.¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.¹² They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger¹³ because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.¹⁴ In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.¹⁵ Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.
- a) To explain all these verses, I should start with explaining what is Baal (pronounced in two syllables as if you care) what is Ba-al and what is the Ashtoreths, and why it's relevant for us to learn this stuff. The short version is Baal was a "weather god". That society is based on agricultural. Therefore, praying for good weather was essential. The people who lived in that land before the Israelites were financially successful. My point is worship of Baal is in effect worship of "money". The appeal is to do something that would help our earnings to grow. That's why literal Baal worship was an issue there for many centuries after this!

- b) The related deity is the female goddess Ashtoreth. The short version is the way to appease her was through sexual intercourse. She got "turned on" by that and prostitutes were used in the worship of Ashtoreth. The attraction to this fake god is the appeal of "cheap sex" and even using it to honor those false gods.
 - c) I'll just say between the urge to honor a god to get blessed financially and to honor a deity as to satisfy our sexual desires have timeless appeal. That's why these false deities were a battle for the Israelites for centuries. Even though those titles are not used today, wanting to appeal to those things are timeless. The reason God wanted those altars destroyed is so we seek Him for success in life and through marriage to satisfy our need sexual needs the way God desires us to. The issue's about trusting Him to have a fulfilling life the way He made us. God wants to be in charge of every aspect of our lives!
 - d) Anyway, we've got the key "overture" paragraph of this chapter here. The short version is the Israelites fell into the temptation to sin and God had to "do what's necessary" in order to drive them back to Him. That's the pattern that will be repeated all through the book.
 - i) So do we have to be perfect? Of course not. Stop and think what God wants from us. A relationship with Him. He wants us to live His way as that's the best way to live life out. The issue is when we realize we mess up, we actually turn from it as opposed of continuing going down the wrong path and trying to offer a "sacrifice" in order to buy God off! The only way we can even have the power to live the life He desires is by dependence upon His power to do so!
 - ii) God never gives us an order that He doesn't also give us the ability to carry it out!
 - iii) We all know the temptation to be like "everyone else around us" is always going to be there. The reason God wants us to live differently isn't to make us suffer. It's so we can be a witness to nonbelievers as what's the best way to live life out!
 - e) Most of us are aware that we can raise our children to do the right thing, and they still go "try to be like the world". Just as Joshua didn't name a successor, maybe the Israelites and us all have to learn the hard way what's the best way to live. The key is to keep preaching the bible not by bashing it over people's heads, but by living the way God wants us to live and being an example to others and offering help when we can.
 - f) Anyway, all these verses can be summarized with the idea that the second generation that lived in Israel feel into the temptation of thinking, "Hey, look how prosperous the people are living here! We should try to live like them! After all, what has God done for us since we got here? Instead of wiping them out, we should be more like them". Let's just say the bible is correct when God says He's a "jealous God". That just means He works hard as to protect what is His. "His" are those who've dedicated their lives to Him. Yes, we may not get the blessings in this life that the world has, but eternity is a lot longer than this life. I'm willing to bet on "that horse" as I'm positive God is God. If He says "go do this" who am I to argue? OK, hopefully we all the get the idea of what's going on here. Remember again we're just reading the "overture". We'll get a lot more details later on the specifics of how the Israelites turned from God and what their consequences were!
11. Verse 16: Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.¹⁷ Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands.¹⁸ Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them.¹⁹ But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.
- a) One of the things to grasp about God is He'll do whatever it takes to drive us back to Him. That includes letting us suffer and it includes bringing people in our lives to help us!

- b) Both of those factors are in view in this overture! It's not just that God wants to bless our lives when we're trusting Him, but also realizing that God will do whatever it requires to drive us back to Him. That's what the bible means when it says "God is a jealous God". It means that when we're one of His, He never wants to let go of that. He desires an intimate relationship with us so much, He's willing to go to desperate measures in drive us back to Him. That's why we read of God allowing Israel's enemies to defeat them and even allow His people to suffer, in effect to draw us close to Him.
 - c) Let me ask a related question: Let's suppose we're already trusting Jesus for salvation and all that entails. Let's also say life isn't going well and you don't feel blessed. First we have to realize God's blessing does not mean life will go well all the time. He promises that He will always be with us. Sometimes His blessing is about providing a "lifeline" through the hardest times of our lives. Sometimes His blessing is showing us ways He'll work out our problems so that He alone gets the glory! The issue isn't a problem free life. The issue is a relationship with Him through all situations in life.
 - i) Meanwhile we left the Israelites suffering because they're ignoring that rule of life!
 - d) The short version of this paragraph is that God is still dealing with His "dilemma". That is the fact He loves those people and He wants to preserve that Nation so God will bring the Messiah in through them. At the same time God won't put up with disobedience. So we'll read throughout this book of God raising up ordinary people to be "superhero's" to relieve the Israelites of their suffering of the moment. God allowed them to suffer again when we see the pattern repeating of ignoring God and He does what's necessary to get His people focused on Him again. The point is if God's willing to do that to them, why do we assume He'll be any less difficult on us.
 - i) So if things are going wrong, how do we know if it's God punishing us? Ask. I see trouble as a "checklist". First, ponder if we've got any sins to confess and turn from in our lives. If not, then at the least, such troubles are often a test. It's God's way to ask, "You still trust Me, even now?" Then we make the best decisions we can.
 - e) Anyway, the Israelites were stuck in this repetitive pattern of honoring God, enjoying that blessing, ignoring God, suffering and turning back to Him. The lesson for us is to avoid a life of suffering we must keep our focus on Him. However 350 years of history are here to show us the danger of repeating that same pattern over and over again. Let's continue:
12. Verse 20: Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me,²¹ I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died.²² I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did."²³ The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua.
- a) These verses lead us back to the question of does God know all things? Wasn't His plan to have a peaceful relationship with the Israelites in that land? Why does God say He's going to leave nations in that land to test them? What's the deal? Was that God's plan the whole time? Let me back up and explain what I think is the big picture.
 - b) A classic question in both Judaism and Christianity is what does the Promised Land mean to us as believers. Is it symbolic of heaven? I'd argue no simply because wars are fought in that land even after they enter it. When I think of the concept of the Promised Land, to me it represents living the life of trusting God with every aspect of our lives. (I first heard that idea explained to me by Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel fame, many years ago.) When we fail to live as God desires, He makes life hard for us "in that Promised Land" as He's doing what He must to drive us back to Him. Therefore, even as sin is a lifelong battle, so every generation of Israelites had to learn war literally for their own survival but also to give us an example of how we must fight sin, all of our lives. OK John, how do we know you are not getting carried away with all this symbolism stuff? Let me explain:

- i) Do you think God wants us to study the bible just to learn the history of Israel? I'd say no. Therefore, there must be far more to it than learning historical facts. What I'm willing to bet my eternity on, is books like this are here to teach us of how God desires we live. The short version is as a witness for Him. The longer version is to warn us of the dangers of turning from Him when we are one of His. That's what we are reading about in this "overture" section of the book.
 - c) Also notice the reference to Joshua here. The idea is just as Joshua led the Israelites to go fight in his day, so God's going to lead His people to continue to fight in "their day". OK, how does God fight for me? Glad you asked. That's what the Holy Spirit is all about. It's His job to provide us with the power to live as God desires we live. Then we're free to go make the best decisions we can living under the guidelines of those rules. That's how He blesses our lives when we choose to live as He desires. What's implied in the end of that chapter is just as Joshua led the Israelites to victory in his day, so the next generation(s) of Israelites (and us) can have victories in our day. Yes the Israelites failed to put their trust in God, and thus we have the saga of the book of Judges. With that said, we're ready for Chapter 3 as the overture continues:
13. Chapter 3, Verse 1: These are the nations the LORD left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan ² (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience): ³ the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath. ⁴ They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses.
- a) The short version is the non-Israelites living both in that land and near that land were in effect a big problem for the Israelites for many centuries. It wasn't until the time of King David roughly 400 years after the era of the Judges began, did David wipe out most but not all of these influences. The complete destruction of the last of these groups was when Israel itself was destroyed in two parts roughly 100 years apart: The Northern Tribes by the Assyrians, an empire that lasted 700 years. The Southern Tribes by the Babylonians. I am just saying here that these nations we read about in these verses will be a part of their history for a long time to come. In terms of years, let's just say these nations battled with the Israelites for over 500 years. (Don't worry, God's not going to quiz us on remembering all these names. The point is these nations were used by God to be a "pain in the sides" of the Israelites for centuries, to put it mildly.
14. Verse 5: The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁶ They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.
- a) The Israelites not only made the mistake of not killing the local residents of that land (as they are listed here), but married them and even served their gods. This is sort of a "If you can't beat them, join them" philosophy. Unfortunately it's not what God commanded the Israelites to do. Remember that God didn't call the Israelites to go kill all nonbelievers. It is a specific judgment on a specific group of people essentially for the crime of living how they want to live while ignoring the creator of the Universe. It's sort of symbolic of the big judgment to come on all people who ignore God all their lives and the consequences we'll suffer when we chose to live that way!
 - b) Anyway, the book of Judges is full of bad news. As I said in the last lesson, it is known as the "Dark Ages" of Israel's history. As an "overture" statement of this whole time period, it mentions the fact that the Israelites not only ignored God's command to wipe out all those who lived there, but instead were intermarrying with them and then started worshipping the multiple god system that was common in the Middle East for millenniums!
 - c) If I had to summarize much of the bible in one thought it is the idea that "God wants us to live a certain way, while nonbelievers live however they fell like it and suffer for it!

15. Verse 7: The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. ⁸ The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years.
- a) Verse 7 is a good summary of who the Israelites turned from (God) to go worship instead!
 - b) Verse 8 is a good summary of the consequences of that decision.
 - c) One of the things one will notice in this book is the length of time the suffering occurs will grow with each "collective" mistake. It's as if God's saying, "OK, you didn't listen last time to what I've done, so I'll increase the punishment until it sinks in!"
 - d) So why didn't God just wipe out the enemies so the Israelites would live in peace and use their lives to worship God? The same reason He allows temptation in our lives as well. It is to teach us to choose God based on our own free will, not due to a lack of options! God gave us free will so we'd freely choose to serve Him with our lives! He allows alternatives as to if to say, "I know that "way" looks tempting, but beware because consequences will come from making the choices we make in life!"
 - e) Anyway the cycle is beginning as we read in Verse 8 of the Israelites suffering the first of many serious consequences that we'll read in this book. To live subject to others, means a life essentially of slavery with little privilege of life. I could give you details about who is this king and who these people are. Let's just say they came from outside Israel to pound the point home that God's "sticking it to them" for failing to live as He desires.
16. Verse 9: But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. ¹¹ So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.
- a) Here we read of the first of the judges. The first thing I'd like you to notice is that this guy is the son of law of Caleb. For those of you with short-term memories, Caleb was the other guy of the original generation that saw the Red Sea part who was allowed to enter into the Promised Land along with Joshua. Whenever the bible speaks of Caleb, it is always good news. In Chapter 1 Caleb gave away his daughter in marriage to Othniel (Verse 13). Here we get another positive message about this guy. We don't know how he defeated the king who was oppressing the Israelites or who joined him. We just know that God picked him and he came from a good family and got the job done. The material for the book of Judges was probably taken from historical records about 350 years after it occurred. It makes us wonder how much information was available "judge to judge". My point is what we have about each judge might be literally all we have, or it maybe all God wants us to realize.
 - b) The key isn't to remember names but the pattern of the Israelites seeking God due to how they were suffering and God raising up "ordinary men" to lead the Israelites not only to a victory over enemies, but lead the Israelites back to Him.
 - c) OK, time for the "fun" judge of the Chapter. (By the way, even though the last half of this chapter is three specific judges, I still want to call it the overture as it sets well the tone for this entire book.)
17. Verse 12: Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and because they did this evil the LORD gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. ¹³ Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. ¹⁴ The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.
- a) Notice in Verse 11 that the Israelites had peace for 40 years. Verse 12 is in effect 40 years later. It's saying in effect, "The Israelites had gotten comfortable not being oppressed by a group, then they started ignoring God. His response was to raise up a new enemy as if to say to them, "Is this what it's going to take to drive all of you back to me?" The answer of course is, "Yes it is, but it doesn't solve the long term problems of ignoring Him."

- b) Time for a little geography. The short version is the Ammon and Moab are part of what is called Jordan today just east of Israel. These two nations have been conquered so today is not the direct descendants of those two groups. The point is simply that these two nations were just east of Israel and they were used by God to conquer His land. The third nation listed was a nomadic group called the Amalakites. A century earlier, God told Moses that the Israelites would have war with the Amalakites from generation to generation (Exodus 17:16). We're now a generation later as we read the Amalakites are still around. Therefore the Israelites should have realized that God was behind this oppression. The short version of all of this is people living in what is "Jordan" today came to conquer and subject to a life of slavery the Israelites.
 - c) The text mentions the "City of Palms". That a nickname for the city of (Jericho). If that is the same city, it means the enemies of His people have rebuilt what God required Israel to wipe out. If it's a different city, the point is the enemies of God's people have a "foothold" in the land of Israel. The point for you and me is when we start to be disobedient to what God demands of us, problems start creeping in, and as we're reading the consequences do come from ignoring how God expects us to live as witness for Him.
 - d) Meanwhile, back to the Israelites. The king of what we call Jordan today (or parts of it) is now "king" over the Israelites and they had to suffer for 18 years under that rule. That got them to cry out for help and the next round begins in the next verse.
18. Verse 15: Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer--Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab. ¹⁶ Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a foot and a half long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing. ¹⁷ He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man. ¹⁸ After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way the men who had carried it. ¹⁹ At the idols near Gilgal he himself turned back and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king."
- a) Time for a quick understanding of how God does help us. He doesn't "snap His fingers" to end a problem. God likes to work in improbable ways so that we realize God's behind the effort to change the situation. That's the pattern we're going to read of here in this book.
 - b) Here we get the story of a judge named Ehud. The bible says he was left-handed. Some of the commentators believe he had something wrong with his right hand, so he became left-handed. It's only worth noting that because I'm willing to bet guards searched him for any weapons and if he was "secretly" left handed, he might have hidden the sword on a place where the guards wouldn't check carefully. Let me explain: if one is right handed, then we keep our sword on the left side so it's easier to grab with our right hand. Unless we know a person is left handed, when the guards searched him they may not check that side for a weapon. It's a trivial point, but it may explain how Ehud was able to sneak a weapon in as he was allowed to visit the king.
 - c) OK, time to back track and explain the official purpose of the visit! If one nation is subject to another, that means they have to pay them for the "honor" of being over them. Since the nation of Israel was mostly agricultural, that probably means a big delivery of whatever it was they grew had to be paid to this king! Willing to bet this taxation was hard to pay for God's people and left them with little afterwards. Anyway, this Israelite named Ehud was the guy in charge of making the delivery. We do know it was made in Israel as Gilgal was a town within that country.
 - d) One of the details that fascinates me is the fact that Ehud said he's got a message from the God of the Israelites and announces it while "walking among" the idols to false gods that are set up at that time in Israel. The contradiction between idols there and a message from God is meant as a blatant contrast to be caught. The "king of Jordan" was aware of the fact that the Israelites worshipped "a true God" and was willing to listen to that message!

- e) As to that foreign king, this is the only passage in the bible that ever says how heavy that person was. The text says he was a fat king. Commentators speculate what that meant. I suspect as that king grew in power, so did his waste line! Sparing you the fat jokes, let us read on, as his weight becomes a significant factor in a few verses.
- f) The key plot point is this king agreed to meet Ehud in private and he had a sword about a foot and a half in length on him as he had his meeting with the king!
19. Verse 19b: The king said, "Quiet!" And all his attendants left him.
- a) Obviously, this king had no idea he was about to die. Obviously, he had no idea that this meeting was God ordained. I'm sure the king just said, "Everybody out of the room" and the servants left at that point. I'm sure that Ehud was as shocked as anyone that he got to have this private meeting with the king and still had his sword on him. I warned you in the last lesson that the book of Judges gets a "Hard R" rating and we're about to see why!
20. Verse 20: Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his summer palace and said, "I have a message from God for you." As the king rose from his seat,²¹ Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly.²² Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.²³ Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.
- a) OK let's get the graphic part over with: Personally, I picture "Jabba the Hut" sitting there as the hero stuck his sword in his stomach. Let's just say he was so heavy that the rolls of fat surrounded the sword. The original Hebrew implies crap came out of him while he is sitting there dying in pain. Yes it's graphic, and a good example of what to expect as we're reading this book.
- b) Time for the tough question: Does God ordain killing? Here was a foreign king who was oppressing God's chosen people. I suspect many had died due to his rise to power not to mention the suffering the Israelites went through while he ruled. Ehud is in effect pulling the switch on this foreign king's execution for crimes he had already committed. Recall in the last chapter that God said He was preparing His people to learn how to fight wars. It's an example here of the Israelites carrying out that order and it started with destroying the leader who is oppressing His people. If nothing else, it's a simple example that God cares far more than whether or not we're saved. He wants us to use our lives as a living witness for Him and that means warfare over the sinful influences of our lives.
- c) Time for a few quick words about housing in the Middle East (I'm sure you didn't see that coming)! The weather's generally hot so it was common to build a patio on the roof as it's the coolest place in the house. Remember we're dealing with a king, so I'm sure that patio was extensive and had more than one entrance! There was an exterior entrance and that's how the story hero made his exit without having to face the guards again. If they did see him, they must have thought, "OK he delivered his private message, and the king desired to see him privately, so they let him go".
21. Verse 24: After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the house."²⁵ They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead.
- a) I don't know if the king had plumbing or was using a "bucket" to relieve himself, yes that is what the text means. It's like the classic question of waiting on a person in the bathroom of how long do we wait before knocking? Especially if it's a king and it can cost us our life if we "tick him off". I picture a few hours going by before a servant dared to put the key in the door to check on the king. It gave plenty of time for Ehud to make his getaway! Here is where the servants realized "the big guy" was not only dead, but there had to be a major bloody mess in that room! While the foreigners were trying to figure out what to do next and where Ehud left, that act in a sense was the signal for the next plot point!

22. Verse 26: While they waited, Ehud got away. He passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah.²⁷ When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them.
- a) The short version is "Ehud got away with it". The text makes an emphasis of the fact that there were lots of idols in the land of Israel as if to pound the point that Israelites did turn from God to worship idols. Anyway, after he escaped he went to the territory of Ephraim (the territory of one of the 12 tribes). My guess is he stood in places to call people to arms, and as he was making that effort, the Israelites knew he was successful in killing that king and it was time for a revolution. So how do I know this, the next two verses say so!
 - b) The important thing is God raised up this guy to literally murder a foreign king who was ruling in Israel. This is God saying, "He's got to go. Go do what I've called you to do and I want you (Ehud) to lead the Israelites to victory over these people". Again it doesn't mean God's going to give us a message in the middle of the night to go kill people. It's a specific judgment on a specific group because they were oppressing God's chosen people. It's our reminder that God's "not to be messed with" as the consequences are eternal and will be a lot worse than any benefit we may get in this lifetime.
 - c) OK, then back to the story.
23. Verse 28: "Follow me," he ordered, "for the LORD has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands." So they followed him down and, taking possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab, they allowed no one to cross over.²⁹ At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not a man escaped.³⁰ That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.
- a) The story of this judge named Ehud was far more than killing a fat king who was ruling over the Israelites at that moment. I suspect once Ehud realized God wanted to use him as God's instrument of judgment, he "got on a roll" and lead an Israelite army to victory over the Moabites. (Again think of Israel defeating Jordan, across the river, as that is an oversimplified geography lesson here.) Remember that the Israelites were not organized as an army at this point. This is a bunch of farmers with improvised weapons attacking a group that had been oppressing them for years!
 - b) Time for a few words about the Jordan River. If one views it up close in the summer or the fall it's not much of a river. In the spring when the snow's melting from mountains that do feed that river, it grows tremendously. The point as it relates here is the starting points of that river (the places where smaller streams feed that river) is the only place where one is able to cross it. That's why the text states the fact the Israelites took control of the "fords" (the starting points or feeding streams) of the Jordan River.
 - c) Anyway, the "tide turned", the Moabites were defeated, the judge did his job and now the Israelites made Moab subject to them and eighty years of peace came because of that! Yes it means God used this judge in a mighty way. If nothing else, it shows that when we cry out to God if it's His will He does bless us in mighty ways when we turn to Him!
 - d) OK then, one more judge to describe and he only gets one verse!
24. Verse 31: After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He too saved Israel.
- a) Again keep in mind that this book was organized hundreds of years after the events took place. It may be a case that all we have in the historical records of this next judge named Shamgar was the fact he defeated a different enemy called the Philistines (they were there for hundreds of years, and didn't get wiped out until the Babylonian invasion. In fact the Romans renamed Israel "Palestine" based on the Philistines as in insult to the Israelites.) I don't know if Shamgar defeated 600 Philistines all at once. The fact is God used this man to wipe out a good number of that group using a long stick. An ox goad is a stick used to make an ox move when it doesn't want to. Personally, I picture this man having Marshall Arts skills, as he was able to wipe out 600 men using a stick meant to push oxen around!

- b) The next lesson will cover two chapters about one judge. Most of the stories we'll get for the rest of the book will be far more detailed and complicated stories involving different men and women used by God as judges. Think of these short stories here in Chapter 3 as part of the "overture" as they give both the positive and negative flavors of Judges based on any one moment in time and whether or not the Israelites were cooperative.
 - c) With that said, that's enough for one lesson, time to close in prayer.
25. Heavenly Father, since You've called us to be a living witness for You, help us not to waste what is the most valuable thing You've given us, our time. Guide us by Your Spirit to use the time and the resources You've given us to be a witness for You. Make it obvious to us what is Your will at this time for our lives. Help us to stick close to You so we can enjoy the blessing and peace of us having that intimate relationship with You, as that's why You made us in the first place! We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.