

# Judges

## Lesson 4

Turning to chapter 2, verse 11 of the Book of Judges, the review of the sin of Israel's downfall without a leader is over. The writer has no more to say on that point. Joshua had died as well as all the elders and leaders of the tribes that served along with him, those who had seen the mighty works of the LORD for the benefit of Israel. A new crop of elders and leaders were in charge, those people who had not seen the mighty works of the LORD. Those people who would fail to follow the LORD's instructions concerning the LORD's covenant and commandments. With that the writer explains how the cycle of the sin of idolatry commenced.

### II. A Review of the Sequence of Israel's Downfall Without a Leader (2:11- 16:31)

#### A. The Sin of Israel's Downfall (2:11-3:6)

##### 1. The Cycle of the Sin of Idolatry Commenced (2:11-15)

##### a) What Israel Did – Forsook the LORD as Prophesied (2:11-13)

Our writer, most likely the prophet Samuel, set forth to record a review of the sequence of Israel's downfall without a leader. It is the largest section in the Book of Judges. He starts with the sin of Israel's downfall by informing us that the cycle of the sin of idolatry commenced in Israel. He begins with the topic of what Israel did. Israel forsook the LORD as prophesied. Chapter 2, verse 11. *"Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, <sup>12</sup> and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger. <sup>13</sup> So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtarothe."* (2:11-13)

Just as prophesied, the Canaanites had influenced this new generation of Israel with their pagan, idolatrous ways. Had the previous generation completed the job assigned to them concerning the Canaanites, all would have been different, but Israel failed. Frankly, Israel did not even try to eliminate the Canaanites because if they had, the LORD would have made sure it was done completely. But as the LORD has said, He would only help Israel complete its task if Israel was willing to complete the task in obedience. Israel did a work-around. Instead of killing all the Canaanites to protect the coming generations of Israelites from the Canaanite idolatrous ways, they found it easier to live with them, and have them pay them taxes in the form of labor projects. The clue to the downfall of Israel is found in the words of the passage that says, and they *"followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them...."* Who were those people who influenced the Israelites? None other than the Canaanites. The high places of Canaanite worship still stood. At those places still stood the images of Baal and Ashtarothe.

Baal is the supreme male god of the Canaanite tribes. Ashtarothe is the supreme female goddess of the Canaanites. Baal is the sun god. Ashtarothe is the moon goddess. The influence of this god and goddess was widespread by the time Israel took the Promised Land. In other nations, Baal is called Bel and Belus as in Isaiah 46:1. His name in the plural form is Baalim. We will hear of him as Baal-berith in Judges 8:33 and 9:4. The compound name means *the covenant Baal*, who comes into covenant with the worshippers to imitate the true LORD God. Later we will find his name in the compound Baal-zebub. It means *lord of the flies*. As lord of the flies, he is worshipped in western Israel specifically in Ekron during the days of 2 Kings 1:2-16. He will be identified in the compound Baal-hanan. It means the *superintendent of the olive and sycamore plantations*, two industries extremely vital to the livelihood of the Israelites as found in 1 Chronicles 27:28. The last compound names him as

Baal-peor which means *the lord of the opening to join in worship*. We saw this god draw the Israelites into his licentious worship in Numbers 25 while the nation was still camped in the Plains of Moab.

In short, the failure of Israel to rid the Canaanites from the Promised Land meant that Israel was surrounded by the sinful worship of the Canaanites.

#### b) What the LORD Did – Forsook Israel as Prophesied (2:14-15)

Because of the failure of the Israelites to rid the land of the Canaanites, the first cycle of sin has surely commenced. The writer addressed what the LORD did. He forsook Israel as prophesied.

Verse 14. *“The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies.”* <sup>17</sup> *Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.”* (2:14-15)

What an awful picture comes to light in these two verses. The anger of the LORD was brought about because of the blatant intentional sin of the worship of other gods. How could Israel ever forget the LORD’s own words in Exodus 20:5 when He spoke directly to the whole nation at the foot of Mount Sinai so they were without excuse. His words were *“I am a jealous God...”* At that same time, He said to them, *“You shall have no other gods except Me.”* He was no longer Israel’s God. They no longer wanted to be His people. What would He do? He did what He promised.

The passage says, *“... He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them ....”* This was not the fault of the LORD; it was the fault of Israel. These plunderers should not have been in the land. They should have been buried and their worship images should have been destroyed. The plunderers should have been plundered by Israel with the help of the LORD. However, they were not. Now, in this passage, those who should have been plundered were the plunderers. Israel was the plundered.

The writer uses a strange phrase to express the LORD’s action. *“...and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them....”* The word for “sold” is a handful in Hebrew. It is *wayyimkerem*. Here is a perfect example of where a Hebrew word can take several English words in the translation. The only way to say it in English is *“and He sold them.”* But what does that mean? It is a Hebrew way of saying, “He handed them over” as if the LORD no longer owned them because they did not want to be owned by the LORD. Surely the LORD was concerned about them, but they were not concerned about Him. What could the LORD do to get their attention? He could remove His protection and let Israel’s enemies take control of them. That is what the LORD did. He did it for their salvation, not for their doom. Let me give an application. Sometimes, in this life, when we are dealing with difficult people who do not want our help or input, the best thing we can do is let them travel down the path they are on, and let them fall into the trap they are headed to, and let them receive scares because of their decisions, so that, in the end, they will turn from their wicked ways. This same principle taught in this verse is seen in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:5. In that passage, the Church has an ungodly issue going on with a man in the body of believers. The man was to be removed from the Church. Why? 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:5 tells why. *“... to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the LORD Jesus.”* In other words, a little punishment now may result in great reward later. In our case, by the LORD allowing the enemy to overrun the disobedient Israelites, in the long run, the Israelites would wake up and turn from their wicked ways. Therefore, the LORD let the enemy take over some of Israel, and Israel could do nothing to stop it as long as they were in rebellion to Him.

Notice also that the writer tells us that *“Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil....”* The LORD was not doing evil to them. He was allowing evil to come upon them because of their disobedience. He would not stop the evil from coming upon them because of their disobedience as the writer says, *“as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they*

were severely distressed.” It was not new news to the Nation of Israel. The LORD had promised in Deuteronomy 28:25 through the lips of Moses. *“The LORD will cause you to be defeated by your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways from their presence, and you will be an example of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth.”* The cycle of the sin of idolatry had commenced.

## 2. The Cycle of the Sin of Idolatry Checked (2:16-18b)

### a) The Responsibility of the Judges (2:16-17)

#### (1) What the LORD Did (2:16)

But the LORD had a plan so the cycle of the sin of idolatry could be checked in its tracks by way of the responsibility of the judges. Here is what the LORD did. Verse 16. *“Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them.”* (2:16)

Finally, we have the reason this book is called “Judges.” It is named because of the judges the LORD raised up to “deliver” the Israelites from their enemies who had taken over in the land.

We must ask the questions, “Are these the first judges that Israel had? Had the LORD previously prepared Israel to fall under the authority of judges of any kind?”

The Nation of Israel was already used to having judges. All we have to do to confirm that fact is to look back to the days under Moses’ leadership and listen to his words. Here is an example from Numbers 25:5.

“So Moses said to the judges of Israel, *“Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor.”*

On the Plains of Moab, Moses addressed Israel’s judges in Deuteronomy 1:16.

*“Then I charged your judges at that time, saying, ‘Hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow countryman, or the alien who is with him.’”*

In Deuteronomy 16:18 we hear Moses call for the appointment of judges.

*“You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.”*

In Deuteronomy 17:9, Moses instructed the people to take their dispute cases to either the priest or the judge in office.

*“So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall inquire of them and they will declare to you the verdict in the case.”*

We can read on about Moses’ instructions for judges in the life of Israel in Deuteronomy 19:18, 21:2; and 25:2. No doubt, Israel already had judges in place. Moses had ordered it to be so in the last thirty days of his life under the guiding direction of the LORD.

Under the fifty-year leadership of Joshua, Israel had judges. At the important reading of the law, along with the blessings and the curses at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, Joshua 8:33 says the following.

*“All Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger as well as the native.”*

In Joshua 23:2 we hear the following “that Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders and their heads and their judges and their officers, and said to them, *“I am old, advanced in years.”*”

In Joshua 24:1, we read, *“Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented themselves before God.”* This last verse indicates that judges were already in place no less than five years from the time the writer says in our current passage, in verse 16, *“Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them.”*

The nation of Israel was clearly accustomed to having the judges among them to handle all the legal issues. Even later in this book, we will see that the judges had certain places where they held court to allow Israelites to come at times of need for their assistance. The court could be as formal as at the gates of the city, or as informal as under a patch of palm trees.

What are we to make of these judges, “raised up” to deliver Israel from the oppressors? Are they some special brand of judges different from the regular judges already in place? The judges in place already had their marching orders from the LORD. They were to judge the issues among the people in accordance with the LORD’s covenant and His commandments. In addition, the priests who were descendants of Aaron, were basically the superintendents over these judges; therefore, being the judges above the judges. It seems that these judges were “raise up” by the LORD in the normal course of transition through the years. When we complete the book of Judges, we will be able to look back and see that some of the judges were part of the normal system put in place by the LORD and Moses. However, we will also find a few who arrived on the scene outside the normal process of selection of the judges. Therefore, some were special people filling a special brand of judges for certain needs. At least one was an evil judge, who would not last long after delivering the people. But at first, the judges “raised up” were probably those selected in the normal course of the changing of the guard in the courts. The next verse supports that position.

## (2) What Israel Did (2:17)

From what the LORD did in “raising up” the judges, we come to what Israel did in responding to the judges. Verse 17. *“Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers.”* (2:17)

Here we see that this new generation of Israel *“did not listen to their judges.”* Even without a national leader, the LORD had a system in place to keep the Nation of Israel on the right path. The organized system of judges and priests was all that was needed to keep the people in the center of the LORD’s plan. No doubt, the people ran to the seats of the judges for disputes in legal matters, but here we see that they rejected the judges when the judges tried to redirect the people in religious matters. It was their job. It was the responsibility of the judges. After the death of Joshua, and the elders and judges who served with Joshua, it did not take long for the people to turn *“aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD.”* The nail in the coffin is in the last part of the verse – *“they did not do as their fathers.”* The influence of the regular judges was lost. Nevertheless, among the regular judges, some would rise to the top to deliver Israel. Then again, some who were not elected judges would appear to deliver Israel. One will be the son of a stranger (Judges 11:2). One will be the son of another woman, lower in class than all the rest of the sons (Judges 4:4).

With the judges in place or not, as stated in this passage, Israel *“played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them.”* A blatant disobedience to the commandments of the LORD who saved them out of Egypt, and elected them to be His people, His nation, His way by which the Savior would come to the world.