

Final Review of Judges

As we take our leave of Judges, let us briefly review its overall structure, notice some features to which it draws our attention, and then return to the question we posed at the outset: Why does Hebrews select the judges it does to include with its heroes of faith?

Structure

The central section of Judges, chapters 3-16, names fourteen heroes (Table 1, chart). Though we usually call them “judges,” five of them are not said to judge. Another important description is that some of them “deliver” or “save” Israel. We should distinguish the meaning of the two titles. The verb “save” focuses on the hero’s action in defeating some adversary. The verb “judge” focuses on the hero’s work in ruling the people. Both tasks are needed for a healthy society.

These heroes come from different areas of the country (Figure 1, chart). During this period, after the death of Joshua (1:1; 2:8) and while there was no king in Israel (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), the Lord led his people, not with a centralized government, but through local men and women, raised up to meet specific needs. The book is a pattern for us who live between the death (and resurrection and ascension) of our Joshua, and his future return as king, between the finished conquest and the kingdom. During this time, the church is a network of independent assemblies, not a centralized organization.

These heroes are usually distinguished as “major” and “minor,” depending on whether their history is structured, in part or in whole, as a cycle of Rebellion against the Lord, his Retribution to them, their Repentance, a Rebuke for their behavior, Restoration under some hero, and Rest or some other indication of duration (Table 2, chart). This cycle appears, in part or whole, seven times. Most of these same elements also appear in the second panel of the prolog, though there they are repeated throughout the chapter and do not form a consecutive progression.

Table 1: The Heroes of the Book of Judges

| Name | Cycle? | Save יָשַׁע H3467 | Judge שָׁפַט H8199 |
|-----------|--------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Othniel | X | 3:9 | 3:10 |
| Ehud | X | | |
| Shamgar | | 3:31 | |
| Barak | X | | 4:4 (Deborah) |
| Gideon | X | 6:14–15, 36–37; 8:22 | |
| Abimelech | X | | |
| Tola | | 10:1 | 10:2 |
| Jair | | | 10:3 |
| Jephthah | X | | 12:7 |
| Ibzan | | | 12:8 |
| Elon | | | 12:11 |
| Abdon | | | 12:14 |
| Samson | X | 13:5 (cf. 15:18) | 15:20 |

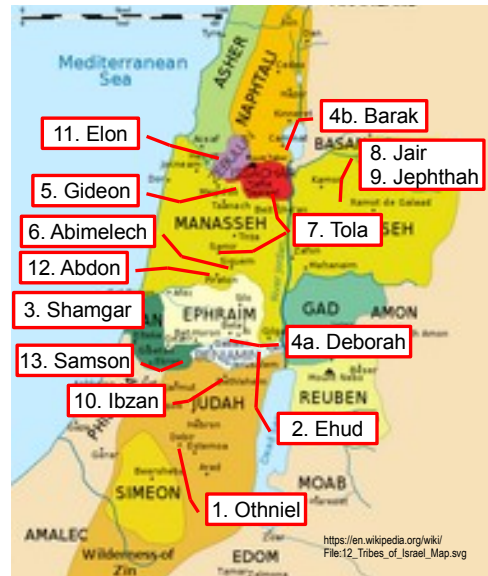


Figure 1: Distributed, Decentralized Leadership

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| | Prolog | Seven Cycles | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|---|--|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Rebellion: <i>Did Evil</i> <i>Forsook, turned,</i> <i>served, whoring</i> | 2:11 :12, 13, 17, 19 | 3:7 :7 | 3:12 | 4:1 | 6:1 | 8:29-35 | 10:6 :6 | 13:1 |
| Retribution: <i>Lord angry</i> <i>Spoilers</i> <i>Years</i> | :12, 14 :14-15 | :8 :8 <i>Meso-</i> <i>potamia</i> 8 | :12-14 <i>Moab</i> 18 | :2 <i>Canaan</i> 20 | :1-6 <i>Midian</i> 7 | 9:23-24 <i>Men</i> <i>of Shechem</i> | :7 :7-9 <i>Philistines,</i> <i>Ammon</i> 18 | :1 <i>Philistines</i> 40 |
| Repentance | :15, 18 | :9 | :15 | :3 | :6 | | :10 | |
| Rebuke | (:20-22) | | | | :7-10 | 9:7-20 | :11-16 | |
| Restoration: <i>Judge</i> <i>Victory</i> | :16, 18 | :9-11 <i>Othniel</i> :10 | :15-30 <i>Ehud</i> :30 | 4:4-5:31 <i>Deborah,</i> <i>Barak</i> 4:23 | 6:11-8:28 <i>Gideon</i> 8:28 | 9:1-57 <i>Abimelech</i> | 10:17-12:7 <i>Jephthah</i> 11:33 | 13:2-16:31 <i>Samson</i> |
| Land had Rest <i>Years</i> <i>He judged Isr.</i> <i>Years</i> | | :11 40 | :30 80 | 5:31 40 | :28 40 | 9:22 3 | :7 6 | 15:20, 16:31 20 |
| Minor judges | | | :32 <i>Shamgar</i> | | | 10:1,2 <i>Tola,</i> 23 10:3-5 <i>Jair,</i> 22 | 12:8-10 <i>Ibzan,</i> 7 :11-12 <i>Elon,</i> 10 :13-15 <i>Abdon,</i> 8 | |

Table 2: The cycles of Judges

This chart differs from earlier versions in including Abimelech as a separate cycle. He is not called a judge, but we should consider him alongside the others for two reasons:¹

1. His history is longer than any of the minor judges, or even the first three judges.
2. Most elements of the cycle appear in his story (Table 3, chart). The only two elements that have no parallel, Repentance and Restoration, are also lacking in the Samson cycle.²

When we recognize that Abimelech's history is parallel with the other six cycles, we can discern a chiasm, with Gideon at the center (Figure 3, chart). Note the correspondences between matching pairs on each side of the chiasm.

But there is an important shift at the center,³ showing the decline of the nation. Note in particular:

- Each character except Shamgar has a time period associated with him (Figure 2). These periods are much shorter after Gideon. At first these men influence an entire generation, but later they must be changed more frequently.
- The earlier judges achieve “rest,” but later ones are simply said to judge (or rule, Abimelech). The quality of the result obtained by each judge decreases.
- The text describing each cycle grows longer (Figure 4), suggesting the increased complexity of the discipline that the Lord brings on his people.⁴

1 Following Gooding, *Eretz Israel*, 16 (1982), 70*-79*.

2 2:20-22 are part of the conclusion of the panel, but could be doing double duty in the cycle.

3 Lund's second law, the shift at the center.

4 This chart illustrates Traina's law of proportion (p. 61): pay attention to the space the writer gives each section.

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- Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah all end in sin.
- Even the similarities between matching members of the chiasm show ominous contrasts:
- Othniel’s good marriage stands alongside Samson’s bad marriages
 - Ehud takes the fords of Jordan to kill the hostile Moabites. Jephthah takes the fords to destroy fellow Israelites from Ephraim.

| | Prolog ch. 2 | Abimelech ch. 8-9 |
|-------------|--|---|
| Rebellion | 11 And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim : ... 17 they went a whoring after other gods, ... 19 And it came to pass, when the judge was dead , that they returned H7725 | 8:33 And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead , that the children of Israel turned H7725 again, and went a whoring after Baalim, ... |
| Retribution | 14 And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them , | 9:23 Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech: |
| Repentance | 4 the people lifted up their voice, and wept. | (lacking, cf. Samson) |
| Rebuke | (1 And an angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, ... 2 ... ye have not obeyed my voice: ... 3 Wherefore I also said, ... they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you.) | 9:7-20 And when they told it to Jotham, he went and stood in the top of mount Gerizim, ... and said unto them, ... 18 ... ye are risen up against my father’s house this day, ... 20 ... let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and the house of Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem, and from the house of Millo, and devour Abimelech. |
| Restoration | 16 the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them. | (lacking, cf. Samson) |

Table 3: Elements of the Judge Cycle in the History of Abimelech

- Jael breaks the skull of a Canaanite oppressor. The woman of Thebez breaks the skull of an oppressor who is an Israelite.

Gideon, at the turning point of the book, ties together both the prolog and the epilog (Table 4, chart, Gooding), and reinforces this negative trend. The prolog and epilog highlight combat and idolatry. In the prolog Israel mainly fights enemies and (after being rebuked) confronts idolatry, and that’s how Gideon’s history begins. But he ends fighting other Israelites (the men of Succoth and Penuel to the east of the Jordan), just like the battle with Benjamin in chapters 19-21, and he, like Micah, finally fosters idolatry rather than opposing it.

| Judges: Between Conquest and Kingdom |
|--|
| 1:1-3:6, Prolog 1:1-2:5, Social Disintegration 2:6-3:6, Spiritual Departure |
| 3:7-16:31, The Judges 3:7-11, Othniel <i>good marriage</i> 3:12-32, Ehud and Shamgar <i>messages, fords</i> 4:1-5:31, Deborah and Barak <i>woman breaks skull of villain</i> 6:1-8:32, Gideon 8:33-10:5, Abimelech, Tola, Jair <i>woman breaks skull of villain</i> 10:6-12:15, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon <i>messages, fords</i> 13:1-16:31, Samson <i>bad marriages</i> |
| 17:1-21:25, Epilog and Diagnosis 17:1-18:31, Spiritual Weakness—Micah’s Idol 19:1-21:25, Social Strife—Civil War |

Figure 3: Overview of the Book of Judges

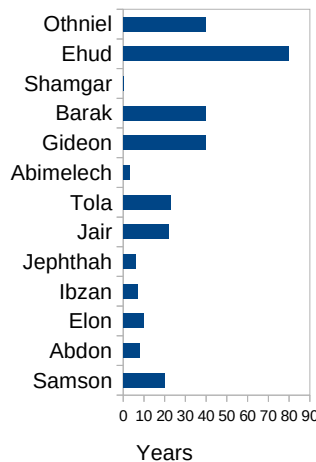


Figure 2: Duration of Each Hero

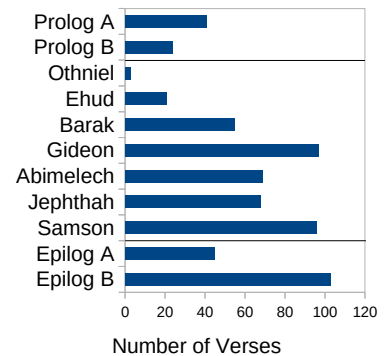


Figure 4: Space allocation in Judges

Parallels in the NT

Clearly, the general trend of the book is from bad to worse. This trend, like the decentralized nature of the leadership provided by these heroes, anticipates the nature of our experience between our Lord's conquest on Calvary and his coming kingdom. The NT teaches

us that this period is not one in which the world becomes increasingly Christian and holy, but rather one of growing apostasy and darkness. Consider the warnings in the NT. Our Savior anticipated the suffering of the righteous, and the scarcity of faith at the time of his return (chart):

Luk 18:7 And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? 8 I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, **shall he find faith on the earth?**

After he abandons the temple three days before his crucifixion,⁵ our Lord's disciples ask him about his coming reign. In terms of the events of Judges, he is about to complete the Conquest, and they are asking about the Kingdom that will follow:

Mat 24:1 And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. 2 And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. 3 And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, **when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?**

In response, our Lord describes this period as overwhelmingly negative.

Mat 24:4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. 5 For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. 6 And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. 8 All these are the beginning of sorrows. 9 Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. 10 And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. 11 And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. 12 And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.

When we study the Revelation, we will see that this prophecy corresponds to the first five seals in Revelation 6 (Table 5, chart). These seals describe the experience of this age.

But there is one bright spot:

Matt 24:13 But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

| | | | |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|------------|
| Prolog | A: Fighting | Israel Fights Enemies (1:1-2:5) | } Positive |
| | B: Idolatry | Israel Faces Idolatry (2:6-3:6) | |
| Central Cycle | B: Idolatry | Gideon Faces Idolatry (6:1-32) | } Negative |
| | A: Fighting | Gideon Fights Enemies (6:33-7:25) | |
| | A: Fighting | Gideon Fights Israel (8:1-21) | |
| Epilog | B: Idolatry | Gideon Fosters Idolatry (8:22-32) | } Negative |
| | B: Idolatry | Israel Fosters Idolatry (17:1-18:31) | |
| | A: Fighting | Israel Fights Israel (19:1-21-25) | |

Table 4: Gideon as Summary of the Book

5 Following Edersheim's chronology, Life and Times, Book 5, Chapter 5

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Table 5: Matthew 24 and the First Five Seals of the Revelation

| Matthew 24 | Revelation 6 |
|--|---|
| 5 For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ ; and shall deceive many. | 2 behold a white horse : and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer. (cf. 19:11 behold a white horse ; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.) |
| 6 And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars | 4 And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth |
| 7 there shall be famines | 5 and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. 6 And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny ; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine. |
| 7 there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places . | 8 behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. |
| 9 Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you : and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. | 9 And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God , and for the testimony which they held: |

This delay in the Lord's kingdom is not a new teaching in the New Testament, but part of the preparation in the OT for the Messiah:

Psa 110:1 The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, **until** I make thine enemies thy footstool. 2 The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies.

Note the word "until." Jehovah tells the Messiah, the one whom David calls "Lord," to wait before bringing in his earthly rule. Something has to happen first. According to Matt 24:13, what has to happen is the evangelization of the world. God will not destroy the current world system until all the world has heard. He will suffer long with men's sin, as long as some of his elect have yet to hear and respond.

Paul similarly characterizes this present age as an evil age (chart). In his first epistle, he writes,

Gal 1:3 Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world [age], according to the will of God and our Father:

Some people talk about "the church age" or "the age of grace," but these expressions appear nowhere in Scripture. The only biblical characterization of our age is "evil."

Near the beginning of his ministry, Paul tells the Thessalonians to expect the man of sin before the day of Christ:

2Th 2:1 Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, 2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. 3 Let no man

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deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come **a falling away** first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;

Toward its end, he warns Timothy to expect increasing apostasy. During his first imprisonment, he warns,

1Ti 4:1 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times **some shall depart from the faith**, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; 2 Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; 3 Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

And just before his martyrdom, the picture hasn't changed:

2Ti 3:1 This know also, that **in the last days perilous times shall come**. 2 For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, 4 Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; 5 Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. ... 12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. 13 But evil men and seducers shall **wax worse and worse**, deceiving, and being deceived.

Peter says that the last days will bring scorn against the gospel, not respect for it (chart).

2Pe 3:3 Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, 4 And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.

People will mock God's promises, and take the state of the world as evidence that there is no God. Why would the Lord allow things to deteriorate so badly? Remember our Lord's promise in the Olivet Discourse:

Matt 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

Peter goes on to explain the delay by God's longsuffering toward sinners, waiting until all of his people have heard the gospel:

2Pe 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is **longsuffering** to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. ...

The minute the last person in the book of life has responded, the Father will declare the end to the "until" of Psalm 110:1, and send his Son back to "rule ... in the midst of [his] enemies" (Ps 110:2). This hope ought to motivate us in our testimony for the Lord:

11 Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, 12 Looking for and hasting unto [hastening] the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?

The verb translated "hasting unto" can also mean "hastening." In the context, Peter is urging his readers to give special attention to their relation to unbelievers. Wouldn't it be wonderful to lead that last person to the Lord? The minute they trust in Christ, the heavens will open and our Lord will come to rule.

The Heroes of Hebrews

Hebrews selects four of the seven major characters as heroes of faith (chart).

Heb. 11:32 And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets:

Why these four? Why not Othniel, or Ehud, or Abimelech?

We understand Abimelech. But Othniel is exemplary, subduing Kiriathsepher (Judges 1) and dispatching Chushan Double-Wickedness (Judges 3). Only he, Samson and Tola both “judge” and “save” Israel (Table 1, see note). But Hebrews omits him. It also omits Ehud, who does the job God gives him, and gives secures an unparalleled 80 years of rest.

Maybe Hebrews is simply following the emphasis of Judges (Figure 4), which gives more space to these four than the first two. But why does the writer give them so much space?

Table 6 suggests an answer. Each overcomes an initial weakness to bring victory. Hebrews goes on to say,

Heb 11:34 out of weakness [they] were made strong

Othniel and Ehud are excluded because their history does not illustrate overcoming an initial weakness. Abimelech is excluded because his history has no victory.

From them, we will learn about weaknesses that can afflict us, and how we can overcome them.

| Hero | Weakness | Remedy | Victory | Final Failing |
|-----------|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Othniel | | | Chushan | |
| Ehud | | | Moab | |
| Barak | Uncertain about the Lord's will | Godly counsel | Canaanites under Sisera | |
| Gideon | Fearful for lack of resources | Exercises | Midian | Kills Israelites Idolatry |
| Abimelech | Proud and domineering | | | |
| Jephthah | Rejected by his countrymen | Pressure on others | Ammon | Kills Israelites |
| Samson | Rebellious teenager | Chastisement | Philistines | |

Table 6: Features of the Major Judges

4-5, Barak: Uncertain about the Lord's Direction

Barak's story starts with Deborah. The threat comes from Hazor, north of the Sea of Galilee, and centers on the Valley of Jezreel. Barak is from Kedesh Naphtali, which lies between the two. Like the other judges, he works near home. Yet the scene opens far to the south (chart):

Judg 4:4 And Deborah, a **prophetess**, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. 5 And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. 6 And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, and said unto him, **Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded**, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men ...

The implication is that the Lord called Barak directly, but he neglected the message, so the Lord had to ask Deborah to remind him to do his duty. Barak's response shows his uncertainty.

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Judg 4:8 And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go.

Why is Barak reluctant? If he were fearful, the presence of a woman would not change his mind. He appears to be uncertain that he can discern the word of the Lord, and unwilling to act without assurance. He knows her reputation as “a prophetess” (v. 4), respects her reputation for insight into the will of God, and is looking to her to tell him what the Lord says. We see further evidence of this when he has mustered the troops on Mount Tabor.

Judg 4:10 And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and he went up with ten thousand men at his feet: ... 12 And they shewed Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam was gone up to mount Tabor. 13 And Sisera gathered together all his chariots, even nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people that were with him, from Harosheth of the Gentiles unto the river of Kishon. 14 **And Deborah said unto Barak, Up;** for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee? So Barak went down from mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him.

If Deborah guides him, he is able and willing to gather the people, and to lead them into battle.

Many believers today, like Barak, lack confidence that the Spirit of God can direct them. They hear the Lord speak through his word, but are not certain that they have the message right. “After all,” they say, “so many men of God differ on this matter; who am I to decide?”

God graciously provided for Barak’s uncertainty by giving him a godly counselor, but the text is clear that his reliance on Deborah is not optimal:

Judg. 4:9 And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.

The Lord has provided godly counselors for us in the various gifts he has given in the church. But at the end of the day, he commands us,

Rom 14:5 Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

There is a fine balance here, illustrated by the Bereans.

Act 17:10 And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they **received the word** with all readiness of mind, and **searched the scriptures** daily, whether those things were so.

It is wrong to neglect teaching from other believers. We must always “receive[] the word with all readiness of mind.” But it is also wrong to rely on the convictions of others. Each of us must search the Scriptures so that the Spirit can confirm to us, individually, the leading of God.

6-8, Gideon: Fearful about Resources

Gideon is also a reluctant leader (chart).

Judg 6:14 And the LORD looked upon [Gideon], and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee? 15 And he said unto him, Oh my Lord, **wherewith shall I save Israel?** behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least⁶ in my father’s house.

6 That is, the youngest—cf. David in 1 Samuel 16.

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Unlike Barak, Gideon is certain that the Lord is calling him. He has a different hesitation. He fears he will not have the resources to do the job.⁷

The Lord provided for Barak's uncertainty with a godly counselor. He provides for Gideon's fear with exercises to build his strength. First he shows his power by consuming Gideon's gift:

Judg. 6:21 Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and **there rose up fire out of the rock**, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the LORD departed out of his sight.

Next, the Lord tells him to confront idolatry in his own family:

Judg. 6:25 And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Take thy father's young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and **throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath**, and cut down the grove that is by it:

By this exercise, the Lord shows Gideon that he has the personal courage to deliver Israel.

Gideon goes on to muster the troops successfully:

Judg. 6:34 But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet; and Abiezer was gathered after him. 35 And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh; who also **was gathered** after him: and he sent messengers unto Asher, and unto Zebulun, and unto Naphtali; and **they came up** to meet them.

Though he is the youngest son of a poor family, 32,000 people (7:3) respond to him. Now he has two resources: his own courage, and the nation's support. But he seeks further assurance:

Judg. 6:36 And Gideon said unto God, **If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand**, as thou hast said, 37 Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; ...

His question is "If thou wilt save." Will the Lord be there to do the work? With the fleece Gideon now has three resources: his courage, an army, and the power of God. There is one more lesson.

He gathers his army by the spring of Harod to attack the Midianites. The Lord has provided both an army and assurance of his support. He must now learn the relative importance of these two resources. The Lord tells him to test the people by how they drink from the spring.

Judg. 7:2 And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, **lest Israel vaunt themselves against me**, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me. ... 7 And the LORD said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place.

Gideon must send more than 99% of his army back home, and fight the war with only 300 men.

The Lord has one final encouragement for him, sending him into the Midianite camp, where he learns that the Lord has sent a rumor of destruction through the host of Midian. Finally, Gideon is ready, and he successfully routs the Midianites.

God dealt with Barak's uncertainty by providing him with godly counsel from a more mature believer. He deals with Gideon's fear by a series of exercises, showing him first that he has all the resources he needs and then the relative value of these resources, and leads him to victory.

⁷ Recall that the word "fear" in Judges is concentrated in Gideon's history.

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Unfortunately, that is not the end of the story. Gideon does more than drive the Midianites back across the Jordan. He turns his hand against some Israelite cities that did not support him:

Judg. 8:16 And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taugth the men of Succoth. 17 And he beat down the tower of Penuel, and **slew the men** of the city.

Then he uses the spoil from the battle to construct an idolatrous shrine:

Judg. 8:27 And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel **went thither a whoring** after it:

10-11, Jephthah: Rejected by his People

Jephthah exhibits another challenge: rejection by those he must lead(chart).

Judg. 11:1 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of an harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah. 2 And Gilead's wife bare him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and **they thrust out Jephthah**, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman. 3 Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him.

Like David (1 Sam 22:1-2), he withdraws to the frontier, supported by other rejected people. Perhaps, like David, they provided protection and support for those who would receive them.

The Lord addresses Jephthah's problem by bringing difficulties on his countrymen that they cannot solve themselves.

Judg. 11:5 And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead **went to fetch Jephthah** out of the land of Tob: 6 And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon.

His patience is rewarded, and he is able to use his considerable leadership gifts, first to negotiate with the Ammonites, and finally to overcome them in battle.

Jephthah shows that our service to the Lord can be blocked not only by indecision (Barak) or fear (Gideon), but by circumstances outside our control. It also encourages us that the Lord can open the way before us when the time is right, and we should wait on him.

Psa 37:7 Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.

Unfortunately, his history, like Gideon's, turns sour. He quarrels with the men of Ephraim. Instead of waiting for the Lord to resolve the tension or using his considerable skills of negotiation, he resorts to force, and like Gideon, ends up slaying his own countrymen:

Judg. 12:4 Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and **fought with Ephraim**: and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, ... 6 ... and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.

13-16, Samson: A Rebellious Teenager

Samson's parents are godly, as shown by their interaction with the angel of the Lord in Judges 13. But his first actions show him to be a petulant, rebellious teen-ager (chart):

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Judg. 14:1 And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines. 2 And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife. 3 Then his father and his mother said unto him, Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, **Get her for me**; for she pleaseth me well.

God disciplines him with a disastrous wedding. His bride betrays him, and he storms out.

Judg 4:19 ... And his anger was kindled, and **he went up to his father's house**.

Importantly, he returns home, apparently realizing that his parents weren't as irrelevant as he originally thought they were.

The next we know, he is returning to his bride, whom according to Jewish custom he considers to be his wife, to patch things up. Apparently his parents have persuaded him of the need to honor his commitment.

Judg. 15:1 But it came to pass within a while after, in the time of wheat harvest, that Samson visited his wife with a kid; and he said, I will go in to my wife into the chamber. But her father would not suffer him to go in. 2 And her father said, I verily thought that thou hadst utterly hated her; therefore I gave her to thy companion: is not her younger sister fairer than she? take her, I pray thee, instead of her.

The father-in-law is following Greek custom, under which Samson's abrupt departure severed the marriage contract. Samson takes vengeance on the town by burning their fields. They escalate by killing his wife and her family, and Samson, carrying out the duties of the kinsman-redeemer, takes vengeance on them.

Judg. 15:4 And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails. 5 And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with the vineyards and olives. 6 Then the Philistines said, Who hath done this? And they answered, Samson, the son in law of the Timnite, because he had taken his wife, and given her to his companion. And the Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire. 7 And Samson said unto them, Though ye have done this, yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease. 8 And he smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter:

In honoring his marriage commitment, and in responding to the murder of his wife, he is trying to act according to the law of Moses.

Unfortunately, other Israelites are not supportive. They betray him to the Philistines, but the Lord strengthens him at the battle of Lehi. After the battle, he prays for water to relieve his thirst. His prayer shows a growing recognition of his spiritual responsibility:

Judg. 15:18 And he was sore athirst, and called on the LORD, and said, Thou hast given this great deliverance [**salvation**] into the hand of **thy servant**: and now shall I die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?

He calls himself the Lord's servant, and recognizes that God is using him to save Israel, as the angel had promised his parents (Judg 13:5).

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His visit to Gaza in Judges 16 is not a promiscuous binge, but a deliberate imitation of Joshua's tactics in Joshua 2, preparing for a major campaign against the Philistines. Then he marries Delilah. We saw evidence that she is not a Philistine, but an Israelite. He has learned from his first marriage to the woman of Timnah, and chooses a wife of whom his parents would approve. Unfortunately, like the men of Judah in Judges 15, she betrays him

Through Samson's life, God's chastisement yields steady progress, overcoming his rebellious immaturity. He learns to honor his godly parents and follow the example of Scripture (in spying out Gaza), and is finally laid to rest in the family tomb (16:31).

Summary of the Four Heroes of Faith

These four stories are long because they illustrate how God deals with his people to lead them to trust him. The message of Hebrews is not that God wants people who are Sunday-school perfect from the start, but people who respond to his instruction in faith and grow to serve him. "Out of weakness [they] were made strong" (Heb 11:34).

The failures in later life of Jephthah and Gideon also offer us a solemn warning. Past victories of faith do not make us invincible against future attacks (chart).

1Co 10:12 Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

The warning of 1 Cor 10:12 makes Gideon and Jephthah particularly appropriate for Hebrews, which warns believers in the face of persecution. The writer reminds his readers of their former steadfastness in persecution.

Heb 10:32 But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; 33 Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. 34 For **ye had compassion of me** in my bonds, and **took joyfully the spoiling of your goods**, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

Then he exhorts them not to draw back, as Gideon and Jephthah did, but to persevere to the end.

Heb 10:35 Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. 36 For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. 37 For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. 38 Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. 39 But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.

Notes

6:14 In this thy might בכחך

At first, this expression is surprising: does it indicate that Gideon is to rely on his own strength, and not on the Lord's power?

The expression בכח with a pronominal suffix appears 16x in the OT.

12x (Num. 14:13; Deut. 4:37; 9:29; Neh. 1:10; Job 24:22; 26:12; 36:22; Psa. 65:6; Jer. 10:12; 27:5; 32:17; 51:15) it refers to God's power, by which he delivers his people. Three of these are Pentateuchal, which Gideon could have known. He would realize that the strength to deliver must come from God, and the whole educational sequence through which God takes him emphasizes that fundamental truth. So what does 6:14 mean?

6:14 is one of four instances that refer to human power. Two of these are negative ("not by his power")

- Dan 8:22 "four kingdoms shall stand up out of the nation, but **not in his power**" describes the Diodochoi (successors of Alexander), stating that they would not have his (Alexander's?) power
- Dan 8:24 describes Antiochus Epiphanes: "his power shall be mighty, but **not by his own power.**" Is the reference to the satanic power behind him?

Judg 6:14 is one of these four. The final one is the closest parallel to our verse:

Eccl. 9:10 Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it **with thy might**; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

Here the statement is an exhortation to devote oneself completely to the task. That meaning fits well with 6:14. "Gideon, I want you to devote yourself completely to this mission." In this context, it does not deny his need to trust in the Lord, but does emphasize what is expected of him.