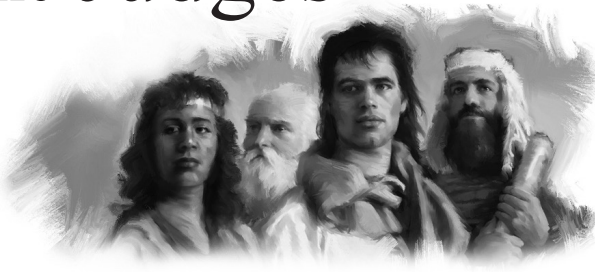


# Conflict *and* Crisis: The Judges



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Judges 4, Judges 6, Judges 14, Heb. 11:32, 1 Sam. 2:12–25, 8:1–7.*

**Memory Text:** “And Hannah prayed and said: ‘My heart rejoices in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation.’” (*1 Samuel 2:1, NKJV*).

The time of the judges was a chaotic period in sacred history. God's people did evil in the sight of the Lord, the Lord “sold” them into the hands of an oppressor, the people cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up a deliverer who brought peace to the land. That is, until the same sad cycle started again.

Deborah, one of Israel's judges, was remarkable for the confidence that she inspired in the men around her. She and Jael are heroines, while the men needed encouraging because of their timidity and lack of faith. A recurring subtheme in the great controversy is also seen in the story of Gideon, when God's people face impossible odds.

Samson was one of the last of the judges. After him, the nation descended into anarchy and hopelessness. He was the reluctant hero, one who was more interested in chasing women than in following God, a parallel to his countrymen who were more interested in worshipping idols than in serving the Lord.

Samuel brings hope to the nation. Under him, a new leadership structure with kings was established, and one of his last acts was to anoint the future King David.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 23.

## Deborah

The story of Deborah adds interesting details to the great controversy theme. Here we see the people of God suffering oppression and facing impossible odds. This parallels what we observed in Revelation 12, with the incredibly unfair contest between a seven-headed dragon and a newborn baby (*see Tuesday's study in Lesson 1*).

The main characters in this story include Jabin, king of Canaan; Sisera, his army chief; and Deborah, a prophetess and a judge (one who settled civil disputes between opposing parties) who had a very unusual degree of authority and influence for a woman of that time.

**Read Judges 4.** In what ways do we see the great controversy theme expressed here? In the end, who alone brought victory to Israel, despite their unworthiness?

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The heroine of the story is Heber's wife, Jael, who is not afraid to identify with God's people and who played a crucial role in the defeat of God's enemies. Judging her actions from our perspective today isn't easy. The last thing we should do, though, is use her deeds to justify deception and violence in order to achieve our ends, no matter how right those ends might be.

In the discussions leading up to the conflict, Deborah assures Barak that the battle will be God's (an echo of the great controversy, for sure). Two verbs are used to describe how God would do this (*Judg. 4:7*). He will "draw" Sisera (the word suggests catching fish in a net) to the river Kishon, where He will "deliver" him into Barak's hand. Deborah's song of thanksgiving (*Judges 5*) reveals some of the details. Sisera's chariots become bogged down in the narrow passes near the river Kishon because of heavy rain. The heavens and the clouds "pour" and the mountains "gush" water (*Judg. 5:4, 5, NKJV*), producing a flash flood that sweeps away many enemy soldiers (*Judg. 5:21*), and Israel is delivered.

**Think of the confidence these men of war had in Deborah. While on one level that was good (obviously), why must we always be careful in how much confidence we put in anyone?**

## Gideon

**Read** Judges 6:1. What is happening here? See Judges 6:10.

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After Deborah, the land enjoyed peace for the next 40 years, but soon Israel was back in the hands of oppressors. This time it was the Midianites, who, with their allies, would enter Israel and destroy all the newly planted crops and steal the livestock (*Judg. 6:3–5*). Israel became greatly impoverished and cried out to the Lord (*Judg. 6:6, 7*). They realized that their fashionable gods were of no use now.

**Read** Judges 6:12–16. What did the angel of the LORD say to Gideon, and what was Gideon’s reaction? Shouldn’t he have known why they were facing what they were? See Judges 6:7–10.

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Despite Gideon’s complaint, which was unwarranted (they were disobedient; that’s why they were oppressed), God was ready to deliver, again, but this time through Gideon. How interesting that God would call Gideon a “mighty man of valor,” even though Gideon viewed himself as something else entirely: “O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house” (*Judg. 6:15, NKJV*). No question, a crucial component of Gideon’s strength was his own sense of unimportance and weakness.

Notice, too, what Gideon had asked of the Lord, in Judges 6:36–40. That is, aware of the odds against them and his own weakness, he sought for special assurance of God’s presence. Thus, we have here a man who fully realized his utter dependence upon the Lord. We can read in Judges 7 about Gideon’s amazing success against the oppressors of his people and God’s deliverance of Israel.

**Why did the Lord choose to use fallen humans in the course of this deliverance? That is, could not He Himself have called “more than twelve legions of angels” (*Matt. 26:53*) to do what was needed for Israel at that time? What role do we, as fallen human beings, have in both the great controversy and the spreading of the gospel?**

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## Samson

The battle lines between good and evil are blurred in the story of Samson. His life starts in impressive fashion with an announcement from the “angel of the LORD” that he is to be a Nazarite from birth. The angel instructs Samson’s parents on how to prepare for their special baby. The mother is told not to drink alcohol or to eat forbidden food (*Judg. 13:4, 13, 14; see also Leviticus 11*). God, indeed, had special plans for Samson; unfortunately, things didn’t work out as well as they could have.

“Just as he was entering upon manhood, the time when he must execute his divine mission—the time above all others when he should have been true to God—Samson connected himself with the enemies of Israel. He did not ask whether he could better glorify God when united with the object of his choice, or whether he was placing himself in a position where he could not fulfill the purpose to be accomplished by his life. To all who seek first to honor Him, God has promised wisdom; but there is no promise to those who are bent upon self-pleasing.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 563.

**Read Judges 14:1–4. How is it possible that God used Samson’s weakness for women as “an occasion to move against the Philistines?”**

*Judg. 14:4, NKJV.*

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Samson “moved” against the Philistines in a number of ways, each in angry response to personal slights. First he killed 30 men and took their clothes back to his wedding feast to pay a debt (*Judg. 14:19*). Then he destroyed their crops when his wife was given to his best man (*Judg. 14:20, 15:1–5*). Then Samson killed many in revenge for the Philistines killing his wife and her father (*Judg. 15:6–8*). When the Philistines tried to avenge that action (*Judg. 15:9, 10*), he killed one thousand with a donkey’s jawbone (*Judg. 15:14, 15*). Finally he pulled down their temple and killed three thousand for blinding him (*Judg. 16:21, 28, 30*).

**Talk about a flawed hero. There seems to be very little from Samson that we should seek to emulate, even though he is listed in Hebrews 11:32 with some pretty exalted figures. Obviously, there’s more to this story than meets the eye. Think about what God could have done with Samson. What about ourselves? How much more could we do if were we living up to our potential?**

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## Ruth

Rather than talking about vast enemy armies that threaten God's people, the story of Ruth speaks about something smaller: a family almost dying out but, instead, being revived. While it includes two larger themes—God's creation being destroyed and His people being under threat—Ruth also tells of the great controversy on a personal level, where it is, in reality, always being waged.

It is no surprise that the land of Judah suffered a famine during the time of the judges (*Ruth 1:1, Deut. 28:48, 32:24; see also Judg. 17:6, 21:25*). This was a sign that the people of the covenant had forsaken God. Sin and rebellion had reduced the land flowing with milk and honey to a barren dust bowl, but in the book of Ruth, God "visited" the land and put life back into it, "giving them bread" again (*Ruth 1:6*).

When Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two young sons first went to Moab, they did so because they wanted a future. The land of the enemy gave temporary relief, but with her husband and two sons dead, Naomi finally decided to go back home.

**Read** Ruth 1:8, 16, 17. What is the significance of Ruth wanting to go with Naomi?

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Ruth was from an enemy nation that had on many occasions tried to destroy Israel, but she chose to identify with God's people and worship their God. In addition, she found favor in the eyes of her adopted homeland, not just by Boaz (*Ruth 2:10*) but also by the people who knew of her (*Ruth 2:11*). Boaz was confident that she also found favor in God's eyes (*Ruth 2:12*), and taking his admiration for her a step further, he agreed to marry her (*Ruth 3:10, 11*).

However, there was a closer relative than Boaz who had first claim to the land of the dead man if he married Ruth. The nearer relative was not interested in another wife, however, because it complicated his financial plans (*Ruth 4:6*). At this point the assembly of witnesses blessed Ruth, likening her to the great women of Israel's history (*Ruth 4:11, 12*), which was fulfilled when she became a forebearer of the Messiah (*Ruth 4:13, 17; Matt. 1:5, 6*).

Talk about a living-happily-ever-after story. Unfortunately, there aren't too many of those outside of the Bible either. Of course, there are not too many of those in life. Here, too, though, we can see how, despite the ebb and flow of life, God's will shall prevail in the end; and that's good news for all who love and trust Him.

## Samuel

What does the beginning of the book of Samuel have to do with the great controversy? There is no obvious threat to the created order, and there are no vast armies at the border. The attack of evil is more subtle but no less real.

**Read 1 Samuel 2:12–25.** How do we see the reality of good versus evil revealed in these sad verses?

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“But although he [Eli] had been appointed to govern the people, he did not rule his own household. Eli was an indulgent father. Loving peace and ease, he did not exercise his authority to correct the evil habits and passions of his children. Rather than contend with them or punish them, he would submit to their will and give them their own way.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 575.

In contrast to them, we see a small boy dressed as a priest (*1 Sam. 2:18, 19*), who, like Jesus, “grew in stature, and in favor both with the LORD and men” (*1 Sam. 2:26, NKJV; Luke 2:52*). This Samuel, of course, went on to become a powerful and faithful leader in Israel. “And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD” (*1 Sam. 3:20, ESV*).

This does not mean, however, that everything went well. The nation faced war with the Philistines, and the two sons of Eli were killed; the Philistines captured the ark of God, and 98-year-old Eli died when he heard the news (*1 Sam. 4:14–18*).

Unfortunately, Samuel was to face the same problem that Eli did: sons who didn’t follow in his footsteps of faithfulness and fidelity (*1 Sam. 8:1–7*).

Samuel marked a transition point in the history of God’s people. He was the last of the judges and a key figure in the developing great controversy. His stable influence guided the people at a critical time. It’s a pity his sons did not follow in his steps, but God is not dependent on human dynasties. As a result of their apostasy, the elders demanded a king—not the best move, as centuries of later history would reveal.

**No matter our home life, good or bad, we are responsible for whom we serve in the great controversy. Whatever mistakes you may have made, why must you always remember that *today, now*, is never too late to make it right with the Lord? Tomorrow might be too late, but not today.**

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**Further Thought:** The Bible is known for not glossing over human sin, human evil. If it did, how could it, and portray accurately the state of humanity? An especially sharp depiction of human evil is found in 1 Samuel 2:12–25, when the sons of Eli are presented in contrast to the young Samuel. First Samuel 2:12 reads, “The sons of Eli were *sons of Belial*; they knew not the LORD.” Notice, first, the contrast: lineage played an important role in biblical life, and in this one line “the sons of Eli” are now, instead, “the sons of Belial.” *Belial* is a rich word, used in a number of forms and contexts, almost always negative. In fact, it is related to the Hebrew *bl* and *bli*, which mean “no” or “not” or “without.” *Belial* itself means “worthless,” “useless,” and in other places is used in the same way as it was in regard to Eli’s sons; that is, other men were called “sons of Belial” (2 Chron. 13:7, 1 Kings 21:13). In Proverbs 6:12, it is equated with the wicked. (In other ancient Near Eastern literature, Belial is seen as another name for Satan himself.) In almost every use in the Bible, it appears as a negative. As human beings, created in the image of God, they were created for a purpose and to have meaning; and yet, according to the Bible, these men were all but worthless, “sons of worthlessness.” What a tragic waste of life. We are either for the Lord, doing something of meaning and purpose for Him, or we are, in the end, worthless. That makes sense, too, considering that our whole existence and purpose for life comes only from Him.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 The Bible makes it clear: there is no middle ground in the great controversy: we are either on one side or the other, Christ’s or Satan’s. Yet, life as we know it doesn’t always unfold with such clear and stark contrasts, does it? Sometimes we aren’t sure just what is the right decision or what is the wrong one; even with moral situations, as well. It’s not always easy to determine what to do. What are some ways we can seek guidance to help us to make right choices when, at times, it’s not so easy to know just what the “right” choice is?
- 2 In what ways have people whom you have looked up to somehow disappointed you? At the same time, in what ways have you perhaps disappointed those who once looked up to you? What have you learned from these incidents about faith, trust, grace, and human frailty?

## A Dream Comes True: Part 3

*The story thus far: Samantha is a nurse in the Amazon jungle. She often faces emergencies where she must depend fully upon God. One evening, a man came to the clinic whose hand had been caught in a grinder and a boy who had been bitten by a pit viper. The only way to save their lives was by taking the fast boat to the nearest hospital, two hours away.*

At last the little group arrived at Manacapuru, the closest town. The boy was admitted to the local hospital, but the man was taken to the large city of Manaus, a journey of nearly two more hours, where he could receive specialized treatment.

Samantha didn't see the man again but after a week was able to visit the boy in the hospital. "He was doing so well! And I understood that our emergency attendance to him was crucial for his life. If we hadn't been there to help, he would have died. When I see the boy now, I think, *Jesus is awesome!* He put His hand on the situation and saved two lives. I don't know how to express how wonderful it is—it was a real present from Jesus. The boy is fine now, he loves to play soccer, and we were able to help him."

Life in the village isn't easy—with very limited water and electricity (three hours a day), no phones or Internet, and very little contact with the outside world. Samantha often goes weeks without being able to connect with her family.

But she doesn't mind the inconveniences. "Just in the time I've been here, I feel my life has changed—my mind and everything. I realize now what's really important in life. I understand much more about Jesus, and I believe that He brought me here. I can help the people, I can offer them salvation. Jesus uses me to help others, and then He blesses me even more than I can give!"

Samantha is currently serving in the Amazon region for one year. Afterward, she plans to return home, unless God indicates otherwise. "I don't know His plans yet," she says. "I just want to hear the voice of Jesus—'you need to stay, you need to go.' But I know that my life is changed and when I go back I'm a different person. I have heard Jesus, and I just want to use my talents and nursing to bring salvation to others."

For others considering mission service, Samantha shares some advice: "When I first thought about mission service, I thought, maybe just one week or month, but here I've learned that mission service changes your entire life and that Jesus has a plan for your life! I used to think that getting a well-paying job, a car, an apartment, all that was so important, but now I can see that it's really very little compared to what Jesus has for you. Listen to Jesus, and maybe He will change your entire life, too."

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GINA WAHLEN, *editor of the Mission quarterlylies.*