

Conflict *and* Crisis: The Judges



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?

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.

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.

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?

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

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 we were living up to our potential?

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?

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 in the Bible. Of course, there are not too many outside of the Bible either. 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?

“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.

Further Thought: The Bible is known for not glossing over human sin, human evil. If it did, how could it accurately portray 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; also came 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."

GINA WAHLEN, *editor of the Mission quarterlies.*

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Samuel 2:1*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand how individuals were used by God to deliver His people from oppressive forces.

Feel: Appreciate God's deliverance from seemingly insurmountable circumstances in daily life.

Do: Rejoice in God's salvation by sharing his or her faith with others.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God Delivers His People.

A Under what circumstances can we best identify with Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1–10?

B What do we learn from the story of Samson (*Judges 14*), who, in spite of his flaws, is still considered a hero in God's redemptive plan?

C Samuel's children did not follow faithfully after their father. What does this teach us about personal choice?

II. Feel: How Great It Is to Be on the Winning Side

A Name some of the solutions that we often resort to in order to find deliverance from addiction, oppression of all kinds, and other debilitating personal circumstances.

B In what ways are our responses, after experiencing personal victories, similar to Hannah's prayer?

III. Do: People Should Be Able to Tell That We Are Part of the Winning Team.

A In what ways may our rejoicing in God's salvation be manifested to people around us?

B How may our consciousness of victory on God's side affect our sharing of faith?

► **Summary:** The book of Judges teaches us that God responds to human cries for help. To achieve this deliverance God uses feeble humans—both men and women, who themselves are in need of salvation. Thus, the battle is literally the Lord's.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Samuel 2:1*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: In many ways the story of Israel during the period of the judges mirrors our own individual experiences in which we disobey God with disastrous consequences (seen or unseen). But somehow God delivers us from our self-inflicted wounds.

Just for Teachers: The lesson for this week includes stories that have elements of violence: people are killed. Students may wonder how such violence could have been sanctioned by God. This is where the theme of the great controversy comes in. Instances of violence and bloodshed should be understood within the larger context of the conflict raging between good and evil. Additionally, help each member of your class to see himself or herself as a player on either God's side or Satan's side in every aspect of life.

Opening Activity: Have a member of the class read the first portion of Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1–10, and then ask how each member relates to the poem. What memories does the poem conjure up in their minds? What are some modern equivalencies?

Consider This: What if God had said something like this: *Since Israel has brought this suffering (oppression from foreigners) upon themselves, let them have it!* In what ways do we do the same to people whom we perceive to be responsible for their predicaments?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The story of Israel during the time of the judges is remarkable for its clear cycle of (1) apostasy, (2) oppression, (3) cry for help, and (4) divine intervention. Judges were individuals chosen by God as instruments to deliver Israel from its predicament at the hands of foreign powers. Deliverance took the form of actual military conflict. The great controversy was manifested in literal military terms. It is this theme of the great controversy that provides a lens through which to view the brutal, violent encounters that make modern sensibilities uneasy in the act of imagining how a loving God could sanction the killing of individuals or of populations.

Bible Commentary

I. The Canaanites Oppress Israel: Judge Deborah *(Review Judges 4 with your class.)*

Following the death of Ehud, Israel begins another cycle of apostasy. That is, national apostasy is followed by oppression at the hands of foreign powers. This is followed by a cry for deliverance. Finally, God raised a deliverer in the person of one of the judges.

In this story, Jabin, king of Canaan at Hazor, terrorizes Israel for 20 years, armed as his troops were with iron weaponry and 900 chariots. This is the equivalent of the latest military technology, as the ancient world transitioned from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age. Ehud had been replaced at some point by Deborah, a prophetess and wife of Lapidoth. Deborah commissions Barak to go stage a fight against Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, but Barak imposes a condition. He would go only if Deborah came with him to Mount Tabor.

The duel ensues at Tabor—with Sisera's army defeated. Sisera flees on foot—to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, counting on the good relations between the Kenites and Canaanites. What Sisera does not know is that Jael has shifted her allegiance to God's side. Evidence that Israel's God is the true God is there for all to see, she must have concluded.

In Jael's tent, Sisera is covered with a blanket and given milk to drink. Jael drives a tent peg through his temple, using a hammer. Barak arrives at Jael's tent to find Sisera's body sprawled on the ground, in a pool of blood, the peg still embedded in his skull. Thus, Jabin is subdued. The very existence of God's covenant people had been threatened, and God permitted Israel to visit punishment on the wickedness of the Canaanites.

Consider This: Why is it incorrect to refer to the killings that we see in the Old Testament as genocide, considering that genocide is, first and foremost, a crime?

II. Midianites Terrorize Israel: Gideon the Deliverer *(Review Judges 6 with your class.)*

According to Judges 5:31, Israel enjoys peace and quiet for 40 years, thanks to Jael. Judges 6, though, sees another slump into apostasy. This time God permits the Midianites to oppress Israel, an oppression that continues for seven years (*Judg. 6:1*). Israelites would flee to dens, caves, and mountain strongholds (*Judg. 6:2*), but Midianites would come with their cattle and destroy Israelite crops.

One day God steps in to deliver His people. Of course, God has always been there. Thus, the Angel of the LORD appears to Gideon (*Judg. 6:11*). Gideon is threshing wheat, hiding it from the Midianites. The Angel commissions Gideon to save Israel from the Midianites (*Judg. 6:14*). Gideon protests that his clan is the smallest in Manasseh, and that he is the weakest in his father's house (*bê't 'āb*). But God declares to Gideon, “‘I will be with you’” (*Judg. 6:16, NKJV*). Herein lies the reason that we, too, are able to carry on: because God is with us.

Consider This: How is it that God refers to Gideon as a mighty man of valor when Gideon's own assessment of himself is far different (*Judg. 6:15*)?

III. Samson a Hero? (*Review Judges 14 with your class.*)

If not for the circumstances surrounding his birth and a clear divine mission for his life (*Judg. 13:4, 13, 14; Leviticus 11*), it often may not be clear what side of the great controversy Samson is fighting for. And to call him a hero is the last thing we might expect; yet, Hebrews does just that by inducting him into its faith Hall of Fame (*Heb. 11:32*). Children in adulthood sometimes may not follow their parents' instruction as Samson failed to follow the instruction given to him by his parents. However, when that parent is God, then failure to follow instruction comes with great peril, as Samson's life all too clearly shows.

Discussion Question: How does Judges 14:1–4 speak to the fact that God can use us even at our weakest moments?

IV. Arrival of Kingship (*Review 1 Samuel 2:1, 12–25; 8:1–7 with your class.*)

Samuel must have been heartbroken when his children did not follow after his footsteps. He made them judges, but what a disaster. Joel and Abijah did not come close to approaching their father's fidelity. They were corrupt, interested in unjust gain; they took bribes and perverted justice (*1 Sam. 8:3*). This corruption infuriated the elders of Israel and led them to demand a human king in order to be like other nations (*1 Sam. 8:5*). But it is not as though they did not already have a King: God had been King all along (*1 Sam. 8:7*). Sadly, Israel's request for a human king was a rejection of God as their national sovereign.

Consider This: What did it mean for God to be the actual head of state or king of ancient Israel? How does He reign as King over us today? What authority does He have as sovereign over our lives? In what ways does His kingship both entitle and obligate us? And to what privileges and responsibilities?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: As believers, our personal experiences often mirror that of the nation of Israel during the time of the judges, complete with cycles of spiritual decline, self-inflicted misfortunes, cries to God for deliverance, and God’s loving and forgiving intervention. Thankfully, this is not everyone’s experience. Indeed as Peter says, God’s “divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3, NRSV).

Thought/Application Questions:

❶ Discuss whether the cycle from “apostasy” to “oppression” and, finally, to “divine intervention” is inevitable in the life of the Christian.

❷ How does this cycle apply to individual churches or groups of churches today?

❸ How can we discern that God is seeking to use us as His agents to bring deliverance to the church or community?

❹ The great controversy divides humanity into two camps—though individuals in one camp may do things that advance the interests of the opposing camp, either unwittingly or in some instances by divine providence. How can you discern which side of the controversy you are on? Does the side you belong to depend on an act here and an act there? Why, or why not?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Unlike most manifestations of the great controversy, which are spiritual in nature, we see actual military battles in the book of Judges. In this context, such hymns as “Onward Christian Soldiers” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, no. 612) take on a new meaning. Help your students to understand what it means to be a soldier for Christ, enlisted in His army to advance His kingdom and combat the forces of oppression and darkness.

Activity: Plan a revival meeting for a church community. How should this week’s study assist the programming for such a revival?