**LESSON ELEVEN - JUDGES FORESTALL THREATS**

1. **Historical Setting (1200-1050B.C.)**
2. Israel was **a confederacy** (an alliance of independent tribal states)
3. There was **no federal head** or central government. Israel was ruled first by one judge, then another, similar to the European Union: led by various prime ministers and presidents for a year at a time, but no single ruler. It is difficult to set a strategic plan or strategy for the continent.
4. They were also **geographically separate**: 2 ½ tribes were east of the Jordan (Ephraim, Gad, and ½ tribe of Manasseh). The western tribes were settled in mountainous areas - they had not been able to drive out the plains people, the Philistines, because “they had chariots” (Jud. 1:19).
5. Israel’s **disobedience:** although the Philistines had superior weapons, Israel’s failure to drive them out was still a matter of obedience. God had defeated superior forces before. The real issue was they had not pressed in and finalized the victory (Jg. 1:28). Therefore, there were still enclaves of Canaanites left, even in the mountainous regions (Jg. 1:34).

These people became a source of testing for God's people. **Would they continue to follow God, or would they adopt the practices of the Canaanites?**

**Question: Can you think of instances in your life where compromise has led to times of testing?**

1. Another area of disobedience is mentioned in Jg. 2:1b-3: the Israelites did not destroy the "high places" or religious centers.
2. Because the tribes were so separated from each other, local interests took precedence over the common good. This affected their religious practice as well; the Ark of the Covenant became less important over time,. This resulted in Israel taking the route of least resistance: too difficult to get to the Ark to worship, so we'll just worship here at home. (Jg. 2:10-13)

This helps to explain the disunity the book conveys Except for the spiritual power of the covenant, with all of its institutions, Israel might not have held together at all.

1. **Challenges facing Israel**
2. Israel's Enemies were also tribal states, minor powers of the immediate area. It was small time warfare, while the super powers of the day, Egypt and Assyria, looked on with relative disinterest. Their enemies were:
3. Autonomous city states that had not been driven out
4. Canaanites and Amorites who had been driven from the land and wanted to regain it
5. New nations in the area wanting to take Israelite land for themselves.
6. Religion of Canaan: In order to understand the nature of the struggle in the period of the judges, it's important to know something of the religion of the Canaanites.
7. "Worship of the Baals and Ashtarts or Ashteroths:" Baal means "Lord" or "owner," and was the male deity who owns the land and controls its fertility. Ashtart is his female partner.
8. Land: the sphere of divine powers. When it rained, water and soil mixed to bring forth life, fertility. People believed it was due to sexual intercourse between Baal and his partner.
9. By ritually enacting the drama, people believed they could assist the fertility powers to reach consummation, thereby insuring productivity of the land. Thus a prominent feature of the cult was temple prostitution.

The Israelites, having been nomadic and unfamiliar with agriculture, turned to the gods of the land for guidance in agriculture. It is possible they didn't intentionally turn away from Yahweh - they looked to Him in time of military crisis, but to Baal for success in agriculture. They were deceived into thinking they could serve God and Baal side by side – hard to understand perhaps, since they had the 10 commandments, and the first two are pretty clear.

1. Some elements of Baalism that were taken and incorporated into worship of Yahweh were:
* Former Canaanite sanctuaries (the ‘high places’ of sacrifice) were taken over and rededicated to Yahweh (rather than destroyed)
* The Canaanite calendar was adopted
* Parents named children after Baal: Saul was Mephibaal, later changed to Mephibosheth (bosheth - "shame"); David was Beeliada (1 Chron. 14:7) – shows they were adapting to the local culture rather than remaining separate
* In Hosea: the Israelites addressed Yahweh as Baal and worshipped Him according to Baal rituals to secure blessings of fertility.

I often hear the argument that Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists all worship the same God, and just call Him by different names. This is not reality. If you explore each religion, with the goal of understanding the ***character*** of their god(s), and compare with God (Yahweh) revealed in the bible, you will find significant differences. Consider different practices of Baal worship (prostitution, sacrifice of children), and worship of Yahweh.

**Question: Last week we considered the idolatry of our culture that might also infect us. What do we add to our worship of God today? Are we syncretistic too?**

Israel's faith was based on the understanding that Yahweh is a jealous God: "You shall have no other gods before me." To worship Baal as well was breaking the covenant. There could be no compromise. Yahweh had to be Lord of one's whole life, or not at all (He's still fussy about that).

1. **Recurring Disobedience: a pattern throughout the book.**

The root of this is found in **Judges 2:1-3**. They had not driven out all the people as the Lord had commanded, and those people led Israel into idolatry. Because of this temptation, God commanded the Israelites to annihilate everyone – men, women, children, even animals as they conquered. It seems like orders of a cruel and angry god.

We saw in the last lesson: **this was not God’s modus operandi for all time – it was for a specific period of time to establish the Israelite nation as the vehicle of his salvation to the nations.** It was also just, because it served as judgement on extreme evil as well.

**The Scenario:** **Jud. 2:10-19**. Faith in God is not a body of knowledge to be transferred from one generation to the next like a bank account. To know God is to acknowledge Him personally, to be in covenant relationship with Him. Each generation must renew or reject the covenant (v.10). Rhythm of events:

* People do evil by forsaking Yahweh who brought them out of Egypt, turning to serve the gods of the surrounding people.
* God's anger is kindled against them. He delivers them into the hands of the enemy who oppresses them. God uses their enemies (history) to judge them.
* In their affliction, the people cry out in repentance. God is moved to pity, and raises up a judge who delivers them from their enemies, they live in peace throughout his lifetime. **Note God's faithfulness and willingness to forgive over and over again.**
* But when the judge dies, people fall back into idolatry. Therefore God's anger is kindled against them again. He takes away His hand of protection, delivering them again into the hands of their enemies, etc.

This happens seven times - each generation learns, but the next forgets. This is a bit too neat and schematic to do justice to the complexity of events, but shows the general pattern.

The story of the Judges emphasizes a central truth: **Israel's vitality and solidarity lay in a united, exclusive loyalty to Yahweh.** The most divisive and destructive threat to Israel was the Canaanite religion. Israel would probably have been lost in the Melting Pot of the Fertile Crescent if not for the military crises which providentially rallied Israel and renewed her loyalty to Yahweh.

Often conquerors are assimilated into the culture they take over (e.g. China. The Chinese have never lost their culture to their invaders. Instead the invaders have been absorbed into the Chinese culture). God did not want the Israelites assimilated into Canaanite culture.

1. **Role of the Judges:** the English translation of "judge" not quite accurate, for the term in Hebrew is not restricted to legal functions, although it included that. The meaning is more that of "ruler."
* They were charismatic leaders with spiritual power that was given for this particular time and purpose (Gideon: Jud. 6:34-35; Samson: 14:6,19; 15:14).
* It was not like the office of king, the ultimate authority in the land, which is most often passed on by bloodline.
* It was a non- hereditary position, based on a special endowment of the Spirit.

Probably the military successes encouraged people to seek the judge for advice too in legal matters, although Deborah's leadership came through legal avenues first.

The judges didn't follow one another chronologically. The book covers an historical span of about 200 years (1200-1000 B.C.). These are vivid vignettes of six judges (there are thirteen judges mentioned, some of whom ruled at the same time).

1. **Vignettes: (list of the major judges in your notes)**
* Othniel, nephew of Caleb ( tribe of Judah - 1200 BC) defeated the Mesopotamians (Ch 3:9-12)
* Ehud (tribe of Benjamin - 1170 BC) defeated the Moabites (Ch. 3:15-30) – noted for his left-handed secretive attack on King Eglon
* Deborah (tribe of Ephraim), and Barak (Naphtali - 1125 BC) defeated the Canaanites,

Ch 4&5) – the only woman, noted for her courage; already functioning as a (legal) judge; writes a song about the battle, decrying those tribes that did not come and help (Reuben, Asher); another woman features as heroine – Jael who kills general Sisera

* Gideon (Manasseh - 1100 BC) defeated the Midianites (Ch. 6 &7)
* Jephthah (Gilead - which runs through both Gad and Manasseh - 1070 BC) defeated the Ammonites (Ch 11)
* Samson (Dan - 1070 BC) defeated the Philistines (Ch 13-16)

**Judges were of varying degrees of character:**

* **Gideon** appears timid, hiding in a winepress, choosing to go at night to break down his father’s altar to Baal – or was he just wise? Or both? He rose to God’s call only after a divine visitation, and two miraculous signs (similarities to Moses?). God saw his potential, calling him a "mighty warrior" or "mighty man of valour." God sees in us what others may not.
* **Jephthah** was a bandit ("adventurer"), son of a prostitute, driven from his home by his ½ brothers. However he knew his history, the series of events that led to Israelite possession of the land, and legal right to it (argues Israel’s right with the Ammonites, trying to use diplomacy rather than war). He was also a rash man – he did not need to make such a costly vow, God had assured the victory. We do not need to bargain with God – he fulfills his purposes. **Q: How might he have still fulfilled his vow without sacrificing his daughter?**
* **Samson** was foolish, repeatedly made poor choices regarding women (didn't seem to learn from experience), yet God uses him to fulfill His purposes anyway – He can use anyone who is willing. Legendary for his fabulous strength.

What they all had in common was that they stepped up in times of danger, and God's Spirit rested upon them, giving them spiritual qualities, making them the kind of man the other tribes would follow.

**Question: What is the message you take away from these vignettes of the Judges?**

**Summary:** Throughout this period Israel’s tribal organization expressed perfectly the spirit of God's covenant with them: they made no move to create a nation-state. Gideon's refusal of kingship, when the other tribes tried to press him into it in 8:22-23 was aligned with God's purpose.

God was their king, and saved them through His Spirit-filled representatives.

The key verse, summarising this period is Judges 21:25. “In those days there was no king. Everyone did was right in their own eyes.” The whole book makes plain the disastrous consequences of every man becoming a law unto himself, setting his own standards of conduct.

**Question:** What parallels do we see in our culture today? How can we be “salt and light” offering a positive alternative?