

STUDY GUIDE

Judges

When there was no king in Israel



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Introduction to Judges

These studies are designed to complement the Bible Talks at Church. Most Home Groups use them in the week before the Bible Talk, and find that this helps to prepare them to hear the talk. Hopefully, any unanswered questions will also be addressed.



The studies will work just as well for personal study. Perhaps you could find two or three short times during the week to work through each passage and set of questions.



The book of Judges contains some of the most memorable stories in the Bible. Like the classic movie 'The Princess Bride' it is full of larger than life heroes and villains. Set in the period after Israel has taken possession of the promised land, it tells the story of the leaders (judges) that God raises up to deliver his people from their enemies.



But beyond the memorable characters and great victories, the book of Judges has a darker side. The Israelites are stuck in a cycle of disobedience and unfaithfulness that is getting worse. By the end of the book the nation has degenerated into religious and moral anarchy. While God continues to provide judges for the people, it becomes clear they aren't the solution to Israel's continuing rebellion. We are left wondering how God can possibly stay faithful to a people who are so determined to rebel against him.



Three Tips for Studying Judges

1. Judges is great literature. Appreciate it! Don't be afraid of celebrating the great victories, enjoying the dark irony, and being stunned by the terrible tragedies. It might help to read the passage before you get to Home Group. Perhaps you could also do some dramatic readings, where different people in the group read different parts of the story.
2. Remember, learning from stories is different to learning from other kinds of writing in the Bible. Stories are a powerful way of communicating but, unlike Paul's letters for example, they communicate indirectly. Stories teach using tools like the plot, the characters, the narrator's comments, word plays and variations of patterns. To find the main point of a story you need to look for how these tools have been used to give a main point.
3. Then you work out how the main point applies to us as Christians.

This might sound like a daunting process, but that's what these studies are designed to help you do.

The Degeneration Generation

Judges 1–2

The book of Judges begins after the death of Joshua, Israel's great military leader. Just before he died he gathered the Israelites and gave them a pep talk.

1. Look at Joshua 23:4-7. What does Joshua say will happen after his death? What does he urge the Israelites to do?

Starting with a Bang...

2. **Read Judges 1:1-18.** Would Joshua have been surprised at how things are working out in Judges 1:1-18?
3. In v 5-15 we get two 'snapshots' which give us an insight into the kind of things that happened during Judah's campaign. The first snapshot talks about Adoni Bezek (v 5-7). What happens to him?
4. Did Adoni-Bezek get what he deserved?
5. As a representative picture, what does this gory little snapshot tell us about Judah's campaign?
6. In v 12-15 we meet the first of a number of prominent women who feature in the book of Judges. What kind of character is Acsah?
7. Would God approve of her request? Why/Why not?

Grinding to a Halt...

8. **Read Judges 1:19.** Would Joshua have been surprised to read verse 19? Why?

At first Judah has lots of success. With Adoni Bezek we see that they are God's instruments of justice, giving the Canaanites the kind of treatment they deserved. Acsah shows their resourcefulness and determination in taking the land. But they can't handle the iron chariots. This may seem reasonable at first glance, but coming straight after a reminder that God himself is with them, it makes you wonder. Can't God handle chariots? From what Joshua said before he died, it didn't sound like anything was going to stop God giving Israel the land.

Ending with a whimper...

9. **Read Judges 1:20-36.** How does the campaign go for the rest of the tribes?

10. Does the story about Joseph capturing Luz remind you of any other Old Testament story?

The well known story of Rahab helping the Israelites to conquer Jericho has lots of similarities with the conquest of Luz (if you want the details, check Joshua 2:1-14). But there are also differences. Look at the end of the Rahab story in Joshua 6:25

11. Compare the way Rahab and the man from Luz react to being spared by the Israelites. What do you notice?

12. What is the significance of the man going and building a new city of Luz?

Apart from Judah, the Israelite campaign is ineffective. Their attempt to destroy Luz is typical. It's not destroyed, just transplanted. Unlike Rahab, who genuinely wanted to join the Israelite cause and serve their God, the man from Luz just wants to preserving his pagan culture and religion. As we'll see, it's this surviving Canaanite religion that causes big problems for Israel.

Who's to Blame?

13. Read Judges 2:1-5. What promise are we reminded about in v1?

14. In the light of God's promise, why is it surprising that the Israelite campaign is so ineffective?

15. What is the real cause of Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites (v2)?

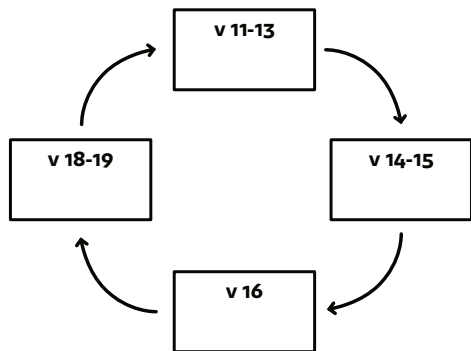
God doesn't completely fulfil his promise because Israel doesn't keep their side of the agreement and obey him. The question is, how and when will God finish fulfilling his promise...

Read Judges 2: 6-19. In v 6-19 we leave the story of Israel's campaign against the Canaanites and get a summary of the whole period of the judges starting at the time of Joshua.

16. How do the Israelites start out their lives in the promise land (v7)?

17. When do things start to go wrong (v10)?

18. In v 11-19 we see the cycle which happens again and again in the book of Judges. Fill in this cycle in the boxes.



19. According to these verses, what is a judge ?

20. How effective are the Judges?
Are they the final fulfilment of God's promise to give the people the land?

The Judges clearly aren't the final fulfilment of God's promises to Israel. They do play an important role calling the Israelites to serve God and delivering them from their enemies. But as the same old cycle of rebellion and punishment happens time after time, it becomes clear that God's promises are no closer to fulfilment at the end of the book than at the beginning. This leaves us with the important question, will God ever be able to fulfil his promises to such a wayward people?

- „ Thinking through the rest of the Old Testament, do you think Israel ever gets their act together? Does God ever finish fulfilling his promises to Israel?

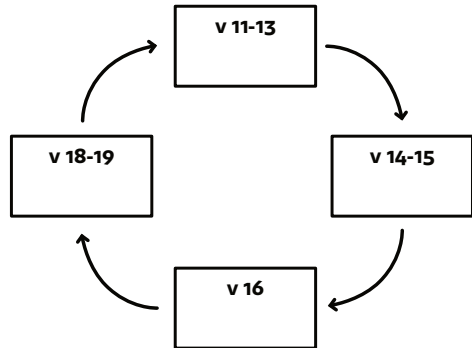
- „ Has God fulfilled his promises now? Can you think of any New Testament passages which might suggest that he has?

Prayer Points

The Quarterback and the Underdog

Judges 3:7-31

1. **Read Judges 3:7-11.** Outline the events of the Othniel story using the flow chart.
2. What do we already know about Othniel (see Judges 1:12-13)? Is he the kind of guy you'd choose to be a judge?
3. Cushan-rishathaim means Cushan of 'double evil.' Look at a more literal translation of the story below. What strikes you?



Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. ⁹ When the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

4. Why do you think the name Cushan-rishathaim is repeated so often?

Othniel, with his family connections and proven military prowess is a typical all-Israelite hero. He defeats a typical enemy, the aptly named pagan king Cushan double-evil.

5. **Read Judges 3:12-31.** Why does Israel get into trouble again?
6. What is the first thing we learn about Ehud (v15)?
7. In Hebrew, left handed is literally 'restricted in the use of his right hand.' What would this mean for Ehud's ability to lead Israel in Battle?
8. What job is Ehud sent to do? Do the Israelites see him as a military leader (v15b)?
9. From Ehud's method of defeating the enemy, what kind of words would you use to describe his character?
10. How does Ehud compare with Othniel?

Compared with the heroic Othniel, the disabled and deceptive Ehud seems an unlikely choice as judge, but God uses him to get the job done.

11. Can you think of any other examples of God's preference for using unlikely heroes to deliver his people (have a look at Matt. 27:35-44)?
12. What is the most memorable thing about King Eglon?
13. Why do you think the writer mentions this unflattering detail?
14. How does the story portray Eglon?
15. How are Eglon's servants portrayed? What similarities can you see between them and their king (Note in v 29 they are literally 'stout' and strong)?

Both Eglon and his servants end up as a laughing stock. Eglon is overweight and gullible. His servants are even worse. God uses one left handed man to humiliate this seemingly powerful pagan king and his followers.

16. What enemies does the New Testament talk about God defeating? Can you think of any references?
17. What things do Christians get scared of?
18. In the light of God's treatment of King Eglon, what would you say to a scared Christian?

Prayer Points

Is There a Man in the House?

Judges 4–5

1. **Read Judges 4:1-11.** What situation are the Israelites facing in v 1-3? Does this remind you of any other situations they've faced?
2. What strikes you about Israel's judge?
3. Does Deborah remind you of anyone else you've met in Judges so far?
4. How is Barak portrayed? How does he compare with Deborah?
5. Who's going to end up with the glory from this campaign?
6. What does vs 11 suggest about Heber the Kennite's relationship with Israel?
7. Read Judges 4:12-24. What happens in the battle?
8. What kind of reception would Sisera have expected to find with Jael and Heber (v17)?
9. How does Jael add to these expectations (v18-19)?
10. How would you describe Jael?
11. Does Sisera's downfall remind you of any other events you've seen in Judges? How?

12. How does the end of the story fit with what Deborah said would happen?

As with Ehud in chapter 3, God chooses an unlikely deliverer to rescue his people. Rather than general Barak, God uses a non-Israelite woman who's clan is allied with the enemy!

13. Does God still prefer to use people like Jael today (have a look at 1 Cor. 1:26-31)? Why?

14. Read Judges 5. This song looks at the events of chapter 4 from God's perspective? What worrying development does the song lament in v15-18?

It seems that like their general, many of the Israelite tribes aren't interested in joining the fight against God's enemies. They want to stay at home with their sheep. This will be an increasing problem as we go on through Judges.

15. How is the victory pictured in v 19-23? Who is the main player?

16. What is the tone of v 24-31?

17. How does this kind of celebration of a victory make you feel?

18. Barak's song celebrates Sisera's downfall in graphic and joyful terms. This can make us feel uncomfortable. Does the New Testament celebrate God's judgment in this way?

19. What is it that makes God's judgment a good thing ?

20. Should we celebrate God's judgment? What dangers might there be?

Prayer Points

Who's the King?

Judges 6-9

1. **Read Judges 6:1-10.** Comparing the opening of this story with the start of the Othniel, Ehud and Deborah stories, what differences do you notice?
2. What point does God make through his prophet?

At the beginning of this 'judge cycle', there is a greater focus than before on the Israelites oppression. But God doesn't rescue them straight away. He sends a prophet to tell the Israelites he's getting sick of their continual unfaithfulness.

3. **Read Judges 6:11-24.** What kind of a character is Gideon? Is his attitude appropriate?
4. **Read Judges 6:25-32.** Where are the idols that Gideon knocks down? Is this surprising?
5. What does this episode tell you about the sincerity of the Israelites' cries to God?
6. **Read Judges 6:33-40.** Why does Gideon put out his fleece? Is it appropriate?

Gideon is introduced in a positive light. On the one hand he's willing to destroy his own father's idols when God asks him to (admittedly under the cover of darkness). On the other hand he is a very humble character. He knows that if God isn't with him he doesn't stand a chance. There's a childlike dependence on God which is absolutely appropriate.

7. Have a look at Matt 18:1-4. How should we as Christians express this kind of childlike trust? Do we need to put out the fleece?

8. **Read Judges 7.** Why does God send so many men home?

9. What makes the battle such a success (v22)?

10. How would you describe Gideon's military tactics?

11. **Read Judges 8:1-3.** How would you describe Gideon's diplomacy skills in these verses?

In the story so far Gideon has been presented as a model judge. He is a mix of military prowess, diplomatic skill and a genuine dependence on God. Maybe he'll be the one to lead Israel out of their cycle of rebellion and unfaithfulness and back to serving God alone.

12. **Read Judges 8:4-21.** How many interactions with God does Gideon have in this part of his campaign? How does this compare with his first campaign in chapters 6-7?

13. What do you make of God's silence?

14. How does Gideon's diplomacy with the people of Succoth and Peniel compare to his diplomacy with the Ephraimites?

15. What was the real motivation behind Gideon's pursuit of Zebah and Zalmunna (v18-19)?

16. Does Gideon's son remind of anyone you've met earlier in the story?

A new Gideon emerges in this final section of the campaign. No longer in constant dialogue with God, he pursues a private vendetta against Zebah and Zalmunna for killing his brothers. Instead of the diplomacy of v 1-3, he cruelly punishes anyone who doesn't help him. The contrast between the new and the old Gideon is

highlighted by his fearful son who sounds exactly like Gideon did back at the beginning of the story.

17. **Read Judges 8:21-32.** What offer does Gideon's success in his private war lead the Israelites to make?
18. Was this an appropriate offer (remember Judges 7:2, 14-15)?
19. How would you describe the end of Gideon's career? How does it compare with the beginning (see Judges 6:25-32)?

What we start to see very clearly in the Gideon story is that while the judges might be part of God's solution to Israel's problems, they are also part of those problems. Not only does Gideon's personal revenge lead the people to forget that God was their real deliverer, he even sets up an ephod which leads all Israel astray! At the end of Gideon's career the Israelites are no closer to serving God than at the beginning.

20. What is God's ultimate solution to the problem of rebellion and unfaithfulness?
21. How does God's solution overcome the problems of a human saviour like Gideon?

Prayer Points

Thank God for his provision of a Saviour who is free from the problems of sin and rebellion and can provide a genuine solution to these problems.

Jephthah: Statesman or Swindler?

Judges 10:6–12:7

1. **Read Judges 10:6-16.** What is God's response to Israel's cry for help?
2. How does this compare with what happened in the Gideon story?
3. What is God getting sick of?
4. How genuine do you think Israel's repentance is?

God is sick of being called on to rescue the Israelites when they're always serving other Gods. If they want to be rescued they can go and ask the idols they spend their time serving. The Israelites protest and get rid of their idols, but in the light of their previous record it sounds a bit hollow. Even so, it seems that God relents and has pity on them.

5. **Read Judges 11:1-11.** What is Jephthah's background?
6. What differences are there between the way Jephthah's appointed and the way the other Judges have been appointed?
7. What do you think of the bargain Jephthah makes with the elders of Gilead? How would you rate his negotiation skills?
8. **Read Judges 8:21-32.** How convincing is Jephthah's speech to the king of Ammon?

9. Do you think the speech is only for the benefit of the king of Amon (see v 27)?
10. Given what we've seen of Jephthah so far, what character trait seems to be coming to the fore?
11. **Read Judges 11:29-32.** Is there anything that makes you feel uncomfortable about Jephthah's vow?
12. Why do you think he makes it? Does he need to?
13. How does Jephthah's vow fit with his character as it's been developed so far?
14. **Read Judges 11:34-40.** Who's the first person who comes to meet Jephthah?
15. Is she doing anything inappropriate?
16. Jephthah is distressed about the whole situation, but in v35 who does he blame and who does he feel sorry for?
17. How appropriate is Jephthah's attitude?
18. How appropriate is Jephthah's daughter's attitude?
19. Who do you feel sorry for?
20. **Read Judges 12:1-7.** Does the "capturing the fords episode" remind you of any other campaigns in Judges?

21. What is different about this campaign?

22. Why is this final episode of the Jephthah story a disturbing one for Israel?

Manipulation is at the centre of this story. Israel is trying to manipulate God. But then they get the judge they deserve. Jephthah, who not only manipulates the Israelites to become their king, but also tries to manipulate God. The tragic ending to Jephthah's attempt to manipulate God with his vow is a warning about trying to bargain with God, however religious a bargain it may seem.

23. In our relationship with God, do we have anything to bargain with? How should we relate to God?

24. What kind of bargains are you tempted to try and make with God?

25. How can religious people today try and manipulate God? (for an example, see Acts 19: 13-17)

Prayer Points

Samson: Saviour or Psychopath?

Judges 13–16

The Incredible Hulk is the story of a scientist who, after exposure to too much radiation, gains a superhuman, out of control alter ego. He's a genuine monster who makes Superman and Spiderman look like schoolboys.



But after reading the story of Samson, you may find even the Hulk a bit tame. At least he's a normal person when he's not annoyed. Samson is a bizarre character through and through. It is hard to believe God would choose to use someone as psychopathic as him. But not only is Samson a judge, in many ways he's representative of all the other Judges. His story draws together many of the themes that we've seen developing through the book and takes us to the heart of the problem with Israel.

1. **Read Judges 13.** Do you notice any differences between the start of the Samson story and the start of the Gideon and Jephthah stories?

Background briefing

Have a look at the laws about Nazirites in Numbers 6

² "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite, ³ he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. ⁴ As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins. ⁵ "'During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the LORD is over; he must let the hair of his head grow long. ⁶ Throughout the period of his separation to the LORD he must not go near a dead body. ⁷ Even if his own father or mother or brother or sister dies, he must not make himself ceremonially unclean on account of them, because the symbol of his separation

to God is on his head. ⁸ Throughout the period of his separation he is consecrated to the LORD. ⁹ “If someone dies suddenly in his presence, thus defiling the hair he has dedicated, he must shave his head on the day of his cleansing--the seventh day. ¹⁰ Then on the eighth day he must bring two doves or two young pigeons to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. ¹¹ The priest is to offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering to make atonement for him because he sinned by being in the presence of the dead body. That same day he is to consecrate his head. ¹² He must dedicate himself to the LORD for the period of his separation and must bring a year-old male lamb as a guilt offering. The previous days do not count, because he became defiled during his separation.

2. What is the primary thing that's supposed to characterise Samson as a Nazirite?
3. Can you see any parallels between Samson and Israel in God's purpose for his life?

Unlike in previous stories in Judges, the Israelites do not cry out for help. God takes the initiative and prepares a rescuer for himself. As a man who is to be specially set apart as a Nazirite, Samson parallels Israel, a nation set apart for God.

4. **Read Judges 14:1-15:8.** What do you think of Samson's interest in the Philistine woman?
5. How does Samson's interest in Philistine women mirror Israel as a whole?
6. The story about the honey from the lion is a bit strange. What implications would this have for Samson's Nazirite vows?
7. What motivates Samson's slaughter of the Philistines? Is he concerned for the same things God is concerned for?

As a Nazirite, Samson is a complete failure. Both in his relationships with Philistine women and in his contact with corpses he fundamentally breaks his vows. In his relationship with the Philistine women he also mirrors Israel, a nation committed to following Philistine gods. His slaughter of the Philistines is in no way related to any concern for God's plans. It is pure revenge.

8. **Read Judges 15:9-20.** Who do the men of Judah side with? Does this give any insight into why they didn't ask for a deliverer at the beginning of the story?
9. **Read Judges 16:1-22.** How committed is Samson to fighting the Philistines? What is Samson really interested in?
10. Is there a reason beyond being tired of Delilah's nagging which motivates Samson to tell Delilah his secret? (If he loses his strength how would his life and responsibilities change?)
11. How does Samson's experience with Delilah give a picture of Israel's experience?

Samson is not really committed to fighting the Philistines at all. He wants to settle down to a life of domestic bliss with Delilah. It is almost as if he hopes telling Delilah his secret will allow him to do this. Once again Samson is a picture of the Israelites. They don't want to get rid of the original inhabitants of their land and serve God alone. They want to settle down in peaceful co-habitation, sharing their gods. The fight is just too hard.

12. What note of expectation is there in v 22?
13. **Read Judges 16:23-31.** From v23-24, what are the Philistines celebrating?
14. Why does Samson want to knock down the temple?
15. What statement is God making by allowing Samson to knock down the Temple?

In the end, God won't tolerate rivals. And so as the party for Dagon gets under way, God gate-crashes and shows in an unmistakable way that Dagon has no power. But, as it has been all the way through this story God defeats the pagans in spite of Samson and Israel, not through them. All Samson is doing is getting

revenge for his eyes. But God is showing his supremacy over Dagon and the Philistines.

16. In what ways are we like Samson and the Israelites? Does God save us through our own efforts or in spite of our own efforts? Can you think of any New Testament passages that help us understand how we compare to Israel?

Prayer Points

There was no King in Israel...

Judges 17–21

In the story of Samson, the sad truth finally became clear. The Israelites don't want to be rescued from their oppressors. They are happy to merge with their pagan neighbours and settle down to a life of Baal and Asherah worship. Even the Judges, who were supposed to be God's chosen deliverers, can't break free from this attitude. In these last few chapters, we'll see the chaotic mess into which Israel has descended.

Background Briefing

1. Have a look at Deuteronomy 12:1-9. What are the features of worship the way God wanted it done?
2. **Read Judges 17.** What kind of a character is Micah? 2. What is so ironic about v 3?
3. What motivates the priest to stay with Micah?
4. How would God feel about the whole situation?
5. What do you think of Micah's confidence in v 13?

This passage paints a bizarre picture. A thief making his own private shrine. An idol being made to worship God. A priest hiring himself out for a decent wage. It is the exact opposite of the situation that God said he wanted in Deuteronomy 12. Something is seriously wrong in Israel.

Micah is confident God will bless him because of the shrine, but if you have a quick read of Judges 18, you'll see his confidence is misplaced. His shrine and his priest are hijacked by a group of Danites, who in turn set up their own shrine, which in time is itself taken into captivity (Judges 18:30). God isn't impressed with the kind of worship being offered in these chapters. It breaks the covenant (agreement)

God had made with Israel and so it doesn't lead to his blessing. But the problems in Israel aren't confined to idolatry.

6. **Read Judges 19.** What kind of a host is the Levite's father in law? What proves so tragically ironic about his 'hospitality'?
7. What decision does the Levite make in v 11-12? Should it have been a wise decision?
8. What kind of a host is the old Ephraimite?
9. How do you feel about his offer in v 22-24?
10. The poor concubine suffers a terrible fate at the hands of the Gibeaites. What do you think about the response of the Levite? (More literally v 25 says So the man seized his concubine and brought her out to them)
11. When does the poor concubine actually die?

This has to be one of the most ugly stories in the Bible. After making a special effort to reach an Israelite town instead of risking the night in a pagan city, the Levite and his party find themselves in a situation reminiscent of Sodom. On top of the terrible rape of the concubine there is a dark irony in which the supposed hospitality of the Father in Law and the old Ephraimite actually contributes to the outrageous treatment of the concubine. In the end there are serious questions about the Levite too: How could he send his concubine out to a crowd like that? What kind of sympathy does he offer in the morning? And what actually causes the concubine's death?

12. **Read Judges 20:1-11.** In v 1, How do the Israelites react to the Levite's grisly parcels? How does this compare with their response to the judges?

A more literal version of v 4-5 is as follows:

4 So the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "I came with my concubine to spend the night at Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin. 5 But the noble men of Gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house at night because of me. They intended to kill me; instead, they ravished my concubine so that she died.

13. Using the table below, compare the Levite's account of the events in Gibeah with what actually happened?

Levites account (20:4-5)	What actually happened (19:22-29)
The noble men of Gibeah rose up against me	
They intended to kill me	
Instead they ravished my concubine so that she died	

14. What is the Levite trying to do with his account of the events?

15. Do you think Israel responds appropriately to the Levite's story?

The note of dark irony continues through this section to the end of the book. After failing to unite behind the judges to fight pagans, Israel is more than willing to unite behind the sleazy Levite to fight one of their own tribes. Through the last two chapters we see this decision bring terrible consequences. Thousands of people lose their lives from both sides of the civil war. Then, to deal with the consequences of their slaughter of all the women from the tribe of Benjamin, the Israelite elders end up proposing a situation that condones women being carried off and raped - exactly the same situation they went to war for in the first place! What has gone wrong?

16. **Read Judges 21:25.** How many times is this phrase repeated in Judges 17-21

17. How does this phrase sum up the these last 4 chapters of Judges?

18. Who should be the king in Israel?

The recurring phrase 'there was no king in Israel' is a sad commentary on the state of life in the land because Israel did have a king. God! The problem was, they weren't interested in following him. The result of living without their king was the moral and religious chaos of these last few chapters.

19. How is Israel a picture of all humans (see Romans 1:18-32)? Can you see how you fit into this picture?

20. Is there any way out of this bleak situation (Rom 3:21-26)?

21. Is there a king in your life?

Prayer Points

