

**Survival Skill #1**  
**Learn From the Past**

# **Judges: Heading Upward In a Downward Spiral**

A widespread sense of anxiety exists in our world today. Maybe we cannot put a finger on the specifics, but many people on our planet have the feeling that our world is falling apart. Anarchy still reigns in Haiti and Albania; the crime rate is exploding in Russia; and the map of Africa has to be redrawn every few months to reflect recent coups and civil wars. Although a lot of good news could be reported these days, people in every land will tell you that something is seriously wrong with our world. This is certainly true in my homeland, the United States!

William Bennett, the United States Secretary of Education from 1985 to 1988, wrote an article in *The Wall Street Journal* in which he sought to answer the question "Is our culture declining?"<sup>1</sup> Gathering data on various social trends, Bennett put together "The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators." That these statistics indicated decline was not surprising. What was shocking, according to Bennett, was "just how precipitously American life has declined in the past thirty years, despite the enormous governmental effort to improve it." He summarized his findings in a widely reported and devastating little paragraph:

[Since 1960] there has been a 560% increase in violent crime; a 419% increase in illegitimate births; a quadrupling in divorce rates; a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes; more than a 200% increase in the teenage suicide rate; . . .<sup>2</sup>

Bennett's research left him agreeing with the words of John Updike: "The fact that, compared to the inhabitants of [some other countries], we still live well cannot ease the pain of feeling we no longer live nobly." We live in distressing times, and we have ample reason to be deeply concerned about the future of our world.

When James Dobson's Focus on the Family ministry opened new facilities in Colorado Springs, Chuck Colson was invited to speak at the dedication service. Colson, the convicted Watergate conspirator who founded Prison Fellowship and has become a spokesman on the moral and spiritual issues of our day, began his speech by listing some of the most infamous crimes of recent years. He then observed,

There is a new face of crime in America. Crime without reason, crime without remorse. Crime used to have a motive—greed, avarice, anger or passion. Today, it's sport, it's fun. We are witnessing in America the most terrifying thing that could happen to a society—the death of conscience.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>William Bennett, "Quantifying America's Decline," *Wall Street Journal* (15 March 1993): A 12. This article was later expanded into a book, William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Chuck Colson, "Where Did Our Conscience Go?" *Focus on the Family* (January 1994): 12.

Crime, though, is not the only indication that something is terribly amiss in our land. We are also witnessing the loss of a moral consensus in America. The popular “right-is-what-feels-right-for-you” philosophy is beginning to take a horrible toll on American culture. Colson continued,

Historian Will Durant said no civilized society has ever been able to survive in human history that did not have a strong moral code. Nor, he added, has there ever been a moral code that was not formed by religion.<sup>4</sup>

Colson’s most frightening words were in his predictions about the future:

When fear begins to become pervasive, someone will come along on a white horse and say, “I’ll bring you order.” That’s what happened to the Germans in the 1930’s when Hitler was immensely popular. He said, “I’ll bring order to your society.” Five more years of chaos in America and someone on a white horse will offer to bring order out of our chaos. If that happens, the result will be tyranny.<sup>5</sup>

While all of this is extremely disturbing, it is not new. In the Scriptures we find a book that details another society in another time when chaos was sweeping the land. The foundations of that culture were crumbling, and unimaginable crimes were becoming commonplace. As is apparently true in some societies today, no forces were capable of reigning in the runaway social decline. The story of this other time and place with which we have so much in common is the Old Testament Book of Judges.

Judges tells a depressing story. Although you may associate it with “heroes” like Gideon and Samson, little can be applauded from these “Dark Ages” of Israel’s history. It is ultimately a story of failure. What began as a grand vision of theocracy (a nation ruled by God) never materialized. When God led Israel out of Egypt, He called them to be something special, something the world had never seen before.

At the time Moses went up to God at Mt. Sinai, God called to him from the mountain and said,

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 14.

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:3b–6a).

This magnificent dream, however, was dashed in the moral, spiritual, and social confusion of the years following Joshua’s death. Because of this tragic failure, one writer has described Judges as the “descending cycle of unfaith in the Promised Land.”<sup>6</sup> Israel became so predictable that the Book of Judges can be outlined as a dismal cycle:

1. Israel forgot God and did what was evil.
2. God delivered Israel into the hands of an oppressor.
3. Israel cried out to God.
4. God raised up a deliverer.
5. The enemy was subdued.
6. The land had rest.
7. Israel forgot God and did what was evil, beginning the cycle again.

For Israel, as with alcoholics and drug addicts today, every failure took them lower than they had ever been before. By the end of Judges a particularly mournful refrain is heard four times:

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes (17:6).

In those days there was no king of Israel (18:1a).

... in those days, when there was no king in Israel, ... (19:1).

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes (21:25).

Order had vanished from the land. The Law was ignored, and God was forgotten. Righteousness disappeared, social order dissolved into anarchy, and violence became a way of life. It was enough to drive Israel into the arms of Colson’s “someone on a white

<sup>6</sup>E. John Hamlin, *Judges: At Risk in the Promised Land* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 13.

horse." Eventually, when they demanded that Samuel anoint for them a king, God told him to share this final warning with Israel:

This will be the procedure of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and place them for himself in his chariots and among his horsemen and they will run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and of fifties, and some to do his plowing and to reap his harvest and to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will also take your daughters for perfumers and cooks and bakers. And he will take the best of your fields and your vineyards and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. And he will take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards, and give to his officers and to his servants. He will also take your male servants and your female servants and your best young men and your donkeys, and use them for his work. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his servants. *Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day* (1 Samuel 8:11-18; emphasis mine).

As bad as Samuel's words sounded, a king was preferred over the bedlam of Israel. Thus, historically, Judges stands as bridge between the conquest of Joshua and the beginning of the monarchy in Israel. It answers the question of why, if a king was so undesirable, Israel ended up with one.

*The Book of Judges does much more than present a cycle of disobedience and explain Israel's descent into monarchy; it speaks to the most crucial issues of life in our world today.* It calls us to re-examine our almost total acceptance of culture. It confronts our tendency to forget God when there is rest in the land and "get religion" only when we are in trouble. It graphically pictures the troubles and heartaches which result from sin, and it reminds us over and over again that God is full of grace and mercy. The customs, the names, and the nations have all changed; but the core issues are, in many ways, the same as ours today. Perhaps no other portion of the Scriptures speaks so powerfully to the specific challenges of living as the people of God in an increasingly hostile and out-of-control society.

We can learn much from the experience of Israel. Paul said it best:

Romans 15:4

"For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Consequently, this is not a study for despairing hand-wringers who wish only to dwell on the decadence of ancient Israel or the world today. This is primarily a study of "teaching," "endurance," "encouragement," and "hope," to use the words of Paul. The bad news is that society is in a downward spiral. The good news is that you and I can be true to God, bold in our faith and confident in our future, even if our nation is spiraling downward. We do not have to travel the direction of our culture. In other words, *we can head upward, even in a downward spiral!*

Welcome to our exploration of Judges. The journey will not be easy. You will see things that will shock you, offend you, sicken you, and convict you. The people will one minute break your heart and the next minute fill you with disgust. You will remember these stories for the rest of your life, though some you will wish you could forget. In each lesson we will be learning a new survival skill, as in lesson one we have seen how important it is to "learn from the past." From this study we can all emerge better prepared to live as people of faith in our own time of chaos. This is our quest! ■

---

### *Faith's Hall of Fame* *Hebrews 11*

Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah are listed among the "men of old" who . . .

"gained approval" (v. 2).

"by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions" (v. 33).  
were "men of whom the world was not worthy" (v. 38).

"gained approval through their faith" (v. 39).

They are part of "a cloud of witnesses surrounding us" (Hebrews 12:1).