

# reading the Bible with Luther



## Session II:

# The Book of Judges: The Heroes of the Hero

by Virgil Thompson

I don't imagine many people, including most Lutherans, would be inclined to locate the pizzazz of the Bible in Judges. Judging from the title of the book, we might have the impression of justices in black robes deciding between guilt and innocence, fair and square. To be honest, there is some of that in the Book of Judges. Of course, if Judge Judy or John Grisham were any basis by which to judge by, it would appear that the courtroom is not without drama. Judges, however, spends less time in the courtroom and more time on the battlefield. "Judges" in the Biblical sense of the word refer to leaders of state who were first and foremost heroes of war. Whether in the courtroom or on the battlefield, the Book of Judges shows the inevitable strife arising between humans when they lose their faith in God to judge, fair and square. Then anxiety and conflict over getting our fair share rules the day. We are blindly bound to tweak justice, by hook or by crook, to our own advantage.

Ever since the days of Genesis 3, that has been our *Achilles Heel*. We prove over and over again we are unable to resist the forbidden fruit hanging over our heads. It seems so enticing—the knowledge of good and evil—and within our grasp. If only we could be as God, judging for ourselves between right and wrong, then we'd see who's in charge of our destiny! But the only thing the knowledge of good and evil has ever gotten us, or promises ever to get us, is conflict—too often armed conflict. Both within and without the community of faith, we seem forever to be in conflict over who will be judge of fair and unfair, just and unjust, guilt and innocence, and where to draw the line between mine and thine. The Book of Judges tells the story of such times in which "*all the people did what was right in their own eyes*" (Judges 21:25).

### The Heroes of the Hero

The story contends that human strife will not be resolved, with peace and justice permanently restored, until God has us back by faith in God's righteousness. Until then, peace and justice will remain disputed territory between competing visions bound to self-interest. Thus, in the end, the real hero

of the story will prove to be the Lord God. Yet, God will establish the peaceable kingdom of everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. This is the one thing of which Christians are justified to be absolutely certain. God *will* make good on the promise of the First Commandment: "*I am the Lord your God, you shall have no others.*" This promise alone holds the prospect of true peace and harmony in our life together.

The Lord, however, always works through the means of ordinary history and ordinary humans rising to the occasion of their calling. So, too, the Book of Judges is about some of the ordinary people whom the Lord called to extraordinary service. The great ones of history, as Luther used to refer to people who performed extraordinary public service. Some of them from the Book of Judges are more celebrated in public—Gideon, Samson, Deborah and Barak, all well-known even outside the Christian community. Some of them are less known to the public—Ehud, Othniel, and Tola, to name only several of the lesser-known. In telling their stories the Book of Judges romanticizes neither heroes nor war. The heroes, for all their charisma, never rise above the struggle to retain their humanity. And war is portrayed in all its devastating and destructive gore. In fact, if Hollywood were to make a movie of the Book of Judges it would of necessity have to be rated "R"! And the "R" rating would be for all the same reasons—language, violence and sex.

### No Place to Hide from God's Judgment

The drama of Judges plays out in sight and hearing of the Lord God. Nothing of the human drama, down to the darkest, most minute detail, escapes God's notice. It's that fact, I suspect, that explains the brutal honesty of the book. There is no place where any of us—judge and jury, prosecuting attorney, defendant and counsel, war heroes, leaders of state along with the long line of rank and file—can escape the presence and judgment of the Lord God. As the Psalmist declared about the omnipresence of the Lord God, "*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your*

presence?” (Psalm 139:7). Judges is one such place where the whole human drama comes into the light of God’s judgment. Actions and motivations are exposed for what they are. The Book of Judges sees beneath all the hype of public relations, beneath well-manicured public images, beneath the spin-doctoring and finger-pointing—deep into the human drama and reveals the way things appear in the judgment of God.

This is not to say God remains aloof of the human drama, seated impartially high and away at the bench of cosmic justice. God Himself is a player in the drama. Of course, people—particularly prideful people of sensitive moral constitution with a highly-developed sense of fairness and justice—would have a much easier time with the Book of Judges if God were content to remain a referee on the sidelines of the human melee. Indeed many, if not most or all, might wish God would stay out of the peace and justice business altogether—unless, of course, He was content to enforce “my” brand of justice. Some might wish to banish God from our earthly affairs altogether.

### Vain Imaginings, as St. Paul Used to Say

No matter what people imagine, the God of Judges is the God who enters into the drama of human history as its Lord, with a will of His own. The writer of Judges has every confidence that God works in the muck and mire of ordinary history to keep His promises to the people He has chosen to be His own people. God has destined them to be a blessing to all the people of earth. And to that end God is bound and determined to preserve them, against everything to the contrary—including and most especially their own self-destructive ambition to be their own judge and jury of what is right and wrong.

### Not Just Ancient History

The time when “*All the people did what was right in their own eyes*” is not just ancient history. Isn’t it the mantra of modern times as well? Today people tend to quote it as though it signals the arrival in the Promised Land. Humanity has come of age. Finally, we are in charge of our own destiny, deciding right and wrong for ourselves. The Book of Judges is not nearly so certain about it. According to the story of such a time—when “*All the people did what was right in their own eyes*”—the Promised Land was turned into a battleground.

In Judges the tide of battle swings continually back and forth like the pendulum of time—not only between the Israelites and the Canaanites, but also among the people of Israel themselves: tribe against tribe, family against family, children against parents, lovers against lovers. The lines between mine and thine, right and wrong, just and unjust are so blurred that life has become a continual turmoil. A child steals what

he figures his parents owe him. A prominent priest abuses his office for fame and wealth. A neighbor in faith is robbed and threatened by death if he reports the crime. A mistress is brutally raped and left for dead. A daughter falls into the hands of depraved men who savagely use her to satisfy their own lust. One tribe feels itself entirely justified to rub out of existence another tribe. Lovers betray one another without batting an eye. The battle between mine and thine, just and unjust, fair and square, rages on unabated. When Judges concludes, “*All the people did what was right in their own eyes*,” it is not meant as a compliment. The Promised Land is in danger of being turned into a Waste Land.

Conflict in the Book of Judges does not confine itself between humans. The people of God, for reasons that defy all reason and understanding, are in rebellion against the very God who has rescued them from a dead-end past and promised a future safe and free from harm. The people’s lust for other gods forms the theme holding all these stories together.

*Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger ... So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to the plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around. — Judges 2:11-15*

It is, as the Book of Hebrews asserts, “*a fearful thing [for sinners] to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Hebrews 10:31).

### Sinners in the Hands of the Living God

The idea of “*sinners in the hands of the living God*,” has pretty much gone out of fashion today. The thought, expressed out loud, of God giving His own people “*over to the plunderers who plunder them*” would be enough to get a preacher run out of town on a rail. But short of cutting Judges out of the

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### Virgil Thompson

*teaches New Testament at Gonzaga University. A prolific author and former pastor, he currently serves as managing editor of The Lutheran Quarterly.*



Christian Scriptures, it is hard to see how such a prospect could be dismissed. Luther faced the reality square on. There was no doubt in his mind that the Lord God was not above putting trouble in the lives of His people. But Luther was equally confident it was not God's final word to His people. He understood the prospect of God putting trouble in the life of His people in the same way Judges understands it. Luther contended it was the alien work of God. It was preaching the First Commandment as law—God declaring, in effect, “*If you insist on living as if I am not the Lord God then I will give you over to the trouble of such a life.*”

The trouble was designed to drive faith back to God, crying out for deliverance. In Judges God does not delay when it comes to answering such prayers. God “*raised up judges who delivered the people out of the power of those who plundered them*” (2:16). Luther spoke of God's rescue and deliverance as His proper work. It was preaching the First Commandment as Gospel. Accordingly, God declares in effect, “*Because I am determined to be the Lord your God I will not allow you to be separated from my protection and salvation.*”

## reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study

### Session II:



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### Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. According to the Book of Judges, God raises up “heroes of faith” to restore the people to faith. In one sense the greatest hero of faith is, of course, the Lord Jesus himself. But the Lord works through the means of human preachers—whether the parent, grandparent, pastor of the congregation, even in one instance an ass (see Numbers 22:22-40). Can you think of “heroes” who have spoken the Word of the Lord to you with the result of restoring your faith in God's promise? Can you tell the story of such a person and time?
2. In reading the Book of Judges Luther distinguishes between the alien work of God and the proper work of God. Based on the Book of Judges, how do you understand the difference? Can you think of incidents from the Book of Judges that illustrate the two “works” of God? Can you think of incidents from your own life that illustrate how God works in the two different ways

### The Pizzazz of Judges

It may not have the pizzazz of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, but Judges is not without the pizzazz of the Bible. With Luther, I can't help hearing, “*Then the Lord raised up judges who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them*” as a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Paul declared to the Galatians that Jesus, “*gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen*” (Galatians 1:4-5). Amen, indeed, for the judgment of God comes in our favor as forgiveness for sinners.

### Looking Ahead:

#### The Book of Ruth: All in the Family

In the next session we will take up one family's story from the days when the judges ruled over Israel. It is a story of tragedy and loss, perseverance and resourcefulness, love and loyalty. Ruth is one of those stories from the Bible the telling of which makes a bit clearer what it means for faith to live out its life active in love for the neighbor.

to drive you back to faith in the promise of God for you and not against you?

3. The Book of Judges is a rather graphic story of the strife that arises when people abandon faith in God and take up being their own god. With trusted friends in faith consider:
  - a. *What do I find most comforting or most disturbing about the Book of Judges?*
  - b. *What background knowledge would help me hear more clearly the message of this book? How does my experience help to hear the message of this story?*
  - c. *What does this book promise to faith?*
  - d. *What does this book demand of faith?*

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