

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, War; Judges: Ehud, Deborah, Gideon Session 20, 6-min. Video Overview

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Today, we're jumping into a huge question that sits right at the heart of the Bible: its relationship with peace and with war. You know, it's a book that has inspired both total pacifists and decorated soldiers for thousands of years. So how can one text contain such powerful calls for both? Let's get into it.

And this is the real head-scratcher, isn't it? We all know those famous lines about beating swords into plowshares. But then, in the very same book, you find these detailed accounts of military conquest, sometimes even commanded directly by God. It's a book of peace and, well, a book of war.

How on earth do you make sense of that? Well, to even begin to unpack this, people usually turn to two major ideas. On one hand, you've got pacifism. This view really zooms in on that ideal of shalom, which is like complete, total peace, and follows Jesus' example of non-resistance.

But on the other side, you have what's called just war theory. This argues that while peace is always the goal, sometimes war is a necessary evil, you know, if it has a just cause. And supporters of this view point to examples like the conquest of the Promised Land.

So here's our game plan for today. First, we're going to look at this idea of a warrior god. Then we'll dive head-first into a really chaotic period of history.

After that, we'll meet some of the absolute strangest heroes you've ever heard of. And finally, we'll wrap it all up by figuring out the lessons we can pull from these ancient battlefields. All right, let's start with that first big, challenging idea: the god of war.

And this isn't some minor theme tucked away in a corner of the text. No, it's a recurring image that really pushes back against a simple, purely pacifist reading. And you see this theme pop up all over the place.

I mean, in Exodus 15, right after the whole Red Sea miracle, the text flat-out calls God a warrior. The Psalms, they're packed with this kind of language. Ecclesiastes famously says there's a time for war.

And it's not just an Old Testament thing either. When you get to the book of Revelation, Jesus returns, not as a gentle lamb, but as a conquering king with a sword, ready to defeat his enemies. Okay, so to see how all this tension actually plays out on the ground, we're going to zoom in on one of the most violent and, frankly, chaotic periods in the entire biblical story: the time of the book of Judges.

This one sentence pretty much sums up the whole era. There was no king, no central government, which led to this total moral and political free-for-all where, just like the text says, everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And all that chaos created this vicious, repeating cycle.

Scholars actually call it the Judge's Cycle. Here's how it worked. First, the people would sin, usually by worshiping some other gods.

That led to step two: they'd get conquered and oppressed by their enemies. Then, in all that suffering, they'd finally repent and cry out to God for help. In response, God would raise up a judge—think of them as a kind of military hero—to save the day.

And after the big victory, the land would have peace. For a while. Until, you guessed it, the whole cycle started right back up again.

So this crazy cycle brings us to the Judges themselves. And let me tell you, these are some of the strangest, most unlikely heroes in all of history. These were definitely not your typical saviors.

Okay, so our first example is this guy named Ehud. And the Bible makes a point of telling us one very specific, kind of weird detail about him. He was left-handed.

And this is just a brilliant example of a key theme here. Ehud's left-handedness—his weirdness—became his secret weapon. See, when he went to meet the enemy king, the guards did the standard pat-down on his left thigh, where a right-handed person would keep their sword.

They found nothing, so they let him in. But Ehud had his dagger strapped to his right thigh. He used it to assassinate the king and free his people.

The very thing that made him different was the thing God used. Then you've got Deborah. Now, in a deeply patriarchal society, she was just an unbelievable figure.

She was a prophetess speaking for God. She was the supreme judge for all of Israel. And she was a military commander.

I mean, just think about the sheer scope of her authority. She held court, settling the nation's biggest arguments. She actually commanded the top general of the army, Barak, telling him when and where to fight.

And then, in this final amazing twist, the winning blow of the war isn't even struck by the general, but by another woman, Jael, who takes out the enemy commander with nothing more than a tent peg. It's incredible. And finally, we have Gideon.

When we first meet this guy, he is the exact opposite of a hero. He's literally hiding in a winepress, trying to thresh his wheat in secret so the enemy army won't find it and steal it. And it's right there, in that moment of pure fear, that an angel shows up and calls him a mighty warrior.

So Gideon, somehow convinced, steps up. And he does what any good commander would do. He gathers a huge army.

He gets 32,000 soldiers together. I mean, that is a serious force, ready to take on anyone. But then God shows up with this totally shocking command: You have too many men.

The reason? If they won with an army that big, they think they did it themselves. So God tells Gideon to send home anyone who's afraid. And just like that, 22,000 guys pack up and leave.

So that leaves him with just 10,000. Okay, still a pretty respectable army. You can still win a battle with that.

But then God says it again. There are still too many. So he gives them this bizarre test down at a stream.

He says only the men who lap water up with their hands as a dog can stay. And with that, another 9,700 men are sent packing. Gideon's army is now down to an almost laughable 300 men.

You see, the point was never to find a few good men or an elite special forces team. The point was to make the odds so completely impossible that when the victory came, nobody could doubt for a second who was really responsible. So after all these strange, violent, incredible stories, what's the point, right? What are the actual lessons about faith that we're supposed to take away from these ancient battlefields? Well, when you pull it all together, a few powerful ideas really stand out.

First, it's clear God isn't afraid to get his hands dirty in our messy, violent world. Second, he almost always chooses the most unlikely, flawed, and fearful people for his biggest plans. Third, these stories seem to be telling us that the very thing you think is your weirdness might just be your greatest strength.

And finally, as we saw with Gideon, true victory has nothing to do with human power or numbers. It's all about radical trust in God. So maybe the most important takeaway is this.

What if these stories were never meant to be a simple rulebook for when to go to war? What if instead, they're a complex, brutally honest look at what it takes to have faith and to find hope and deliverance in a really, really broken world? That's the question they leave us chewing on.