

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Session 21, Judges: Samson, 2 Levites; Ruth

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Welcome to the Deep Dive. Today, we're going to be looking at the world of Judges and Ruth. Okay.

And we're going to be focusing on some of the most compelling characters. Right. And honestly, some of the head-scratching moments too.

Yeah, definitely. Our source material for this Deep Dive is going to be excerpts from Dr. Ted Hildebrandt's Old Testament lectures. Great source.

They're packed with historical context and theological insights. Yeah. Plus, he's got a great sense of humor.

He does, he does. Our mission today is to figure out what makes these figures tick. And what their stories reveal about power, faith, and the good old messy human experience.

All the good stuff. All the good stuff. Yeah, these stories, even the ones that kind of make us raise an eyebrow.

Yeah. They really get to the heart of what it means to be human. Right.

They're wrestling with these big questions and sometimes making some pretty big mistakes along the way. So true. Okay, let's dive in with Abimelech.

Remember Gideon? The guy who used a fleece to get divine guidance and led Israel to victory against the Midianites. Yeah, he's a big figure. Well, one of his sons is named Abimelech, which means my father is king.

Interesting. And right there, you have a major clue that things are about to get interesting. You see, during the time of the judges, there were no kings in Israel.

No kings, right. Like someone today naming their kid emperor of earth. Right.

A bit premature. It's like, come on. Right, but it definitely tells you something about their aspirations.

Exactly. It's a challenge to the established order. Yeah.

And it hints at Abimelech's ambition and his grab for power. And we see this ambition even more in the fable that Abimelech's brother Jotham tells. Okay.

The fable of the trees choosing a king. A fable. It might surprise you to know that there are fables within the Bible.

Yeah, this is true. Using symbolism and allegory to teach a lesson. Okay.

So in this fable, the trees are going around looking for a king. Right. First they ask the olive tree, then the fig tree.

You know, solid, productive choices. Right, good options. They both refuse, recognizing that true leadership is about serving others.

Okay. Not seeking power for yourself. Right.

But then the trees turn to the bramble bush. Oh boy. Thorny, useless, but promising to provide shade.

Not a good leader. Well, the bramble bush, which represents Abimelech. Okay.

Jumps at the chance to rule. Of course. It's such a sharp critique of these power-hungry leaders who offer empty promises.

And ultimately cause harm. A lot of damage. Yeah, it's an image that resonates across time.

Right. We see it in our own world, right? Oh yeah. Leaders who just crave power, even though they lack the competence or the character to use it wisely.

For sure. And ultimately this story speaks to that broader theme that runs throughout the Judges. Oh.

Judges. Okay. Everyone doing what is right in their own eyes.

Leading to chaos and moral decline. It makes you wonder: what are the bramble bushes in our own time? Yeah, that's a good question. What are the red flags we should be looking out for both in ourselves and in those who seek to lead? Absolutely.

That's a great question for all of us to consider. Yeah. Now, moving on to Jephthah.

Here's a judge with a story that is hard to forget. He starts as an outcast, but becomes a leader when the Israelites are threatened. Right.

And the way God calls him to leadership involves some seriously divine sarcasm. Divine sarcasm. Okay, now I'm intrigued.

God basically tells the Israelites. Yeah. Since you've chosen to worship other gods, go ahead and cry out to them for help.

Oh. Now, he's obviously not endorsing idolatry. Right.

He's using sarcasm to expose the absurdity of their choices. Okay. And draw them back to himself.

That's pretty funny. It is. It's a good reminder that understanding tone and context- yeah.

Is crucial when we're reading the Bible. For sure. Or really any kind of communication.

Exactly. But speaking of interpretations, Jephthah's story takes a very dark turn with his infamous vow. He vows to sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his house when he returns from battle.

Right. And tragically, it's his daughter. This passage is a tough one.

It really is. Yeah. For centuries, scholars have debated its meaning.

Right. And it forces us to confront these really difficult questions about the nature of vows, faith in the face of tragedy, and how we grapple with different interpretations of scripture. It's a heavy one.

The majority view is that Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter. Right. But Dr. Hildebrandt presents a compelling argument for a different interpretation.

He does. He does. He suggests that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to lifelong service in the temple.

Right. The text emphasizes her virginity and compares her situation to the dedication of the Levites in Numbers 8.11. Yes. Which would have been a huge sacrifice, essentially ending Jephthah's family line.

Yeah, for sure. So while the exact meaning is debated. Right.

Jephthah's story definitely makes us think about the vows we make. Yeah. And the unintended consequences of our actions.

Yeah. Even when we're motivated by faith. Yeah.

Sometimes good intentions don't always. They don't always work out. Lead to good outcomes.

Yeah. Sometimes trying to understand these challenging passages can help us grow in our faith. Right.

Even if we don't arrive at easy answers. For sure. Now, Jephthah's story also gives us this fascinating word, shibboleth.

Right. You've probably heard it used before, but do you know where it comes from? It's one of those words that I've definitely heard, but never really thought about its origin. Okay.

So after his victory, Jephthah faces another conflict. Okay. This time with the Ephraimites.

And he comes up with a clever way to identify his enemies. Okay. He asks them to pronounce the word shibboleth.

How did that work? Well, because of their original dialect, the Ephraimites couldn't pronounce it correctly. It would say sibboleth instead. Interesting.

It's like today asking someone to say caramel. Yeah. You can often tell where they're from based on how they pronounce it.

I've never thought about it that way. Right. So this incident gave rise to the word shibboleth as we use it today.

Uh-huh. A word or custom that distinguishes a particular group of people. So think about it.

What shibboleths do you use? Oh, wow. Consciously or unconsciously, to signal belonging. That could be anything.

Yeah. A political slogan, a certain way of dressing, even the music you listen to. Interesting.

It's fascinating how these subtle markers shape our identities and interactions. Absolutely. Now, are you ready for a deep dive into the world of Samson? Bring on the strong man.

Dr. Hildebrandt calls him Sonny, which I love. That's great. Samson is this legendary figure famous for his incredible strength.

Oh, yeah. Killing a lion with his bare hands, carrying city gates uphill for miles. Wow.

His strength wasn't just brute force, though. Right. It was directly tied to the presence of the spirit of God, which is a recurring theme in the Old Testament when we see displays of extraordinary power.

Definitely. But for all his strength, Samson is also known for his weakness. Right.

Specifically for women. Yes, which eventually leads to his downfall. It does.

He's a classic example of a flawed hero, chosen by God for a special purpose, yet deeply human, prone to temptation and bad decisions. So true. His love life was a roller coaster.

First, there's his Philistine wife from Timnah. Right. And let's just say that relationship ended badly.

It does not end well. The riddle at the wedding feast, the betrayal, the burning of the Philistine fields. It's just a mess.

It's a story about revenge and uncontrolled anger. For sure. Then there's the incident with the Naza stripper.

Right. Dr. Hugenberger offers an interesting interpretation of this event. He does.

Suggesting that Samson's actions might have been part of a spy mission, similar to the story of Rahab. It's an interesting take. It challenges the traditional view of Samson simply being driven by lust.

Yeah. And reminds us that these stories can have multiple layers, that actions can have hidden motives. For sure.

But then, of course, there's Delilah, the ultimate femme fatale. Yeah, and she's trouble. She's hired by the Philistines to uncover the secret of Samson's strength.

Despite his better judgment, he falls for her hard. He does. Interestingly, the narrative might be compressed here.

OK. What seems like a string of foolish decisions on Samson's part. Right.

Might have actually unfolded over a longer period of time. So maybe Samson wasn't as naive as he seems. Interesting.

So what appears to be a quick downfall. Right. Might have been a much slower, more complex process.

Exactly. Remember, historical narratives are often condensed for the sake of storytelling. Right.

Makes sense. Yeah. But regardless, the ending is undeniably tragic.

It is. Delilah betrays Samson. His hair is cut.

Oh, man. And he's captured, blinded, and humiliated by the Philistines. Brutal.

Yet even in his defeat, God uses Samson to accomplish his purposes. Right. In a final act of defiance, Samson collapses the Philistine temple, killing himself and thousands of his enemies.

It's a powerful image of how even flawed individuals can be instruments of divine judgment. It's actually pretty inspiring. Even with all his mistakes, Samson is listed as a hero of faith in Hebrews 11.

That's right. That's the beauty of grace, isn't it? Yeah. Our flaws don't disqualify us from being used by God.

So true. Often they become the very tools he uses to shape us and work through us. Okay, now we're getting into the tale of two Levites.

Right. And this section of Judges gets complicated. It does.

It's a mix of idolatry, betrayal, and tribal conflict. Yeah. That sets the stage for the eventual rise of kingship in Israel.

We start with a Danite Levite who becomes a priest for an idol. Yeah. What does that tell us about this period in Israel's history? It highlights that ongoing problem of idolatry that plagued them.

They were constantly being pulled away from worshiping the one true God. Right. And this Levite's actions have a ripple effect.

Okay. Contributing to the establishment of idol worship in the city of Dan. Wow.

Which later becomes a major center of idolatry under King Jeroboam. So one man's choice to turn away from God has lasting consequences, shaping the religious landscape for generations. It does.

It makes you think about the impact of our own choices, doesn't it? Right. Even seemingly small acts can have ripple effects. Yeah.

That we may never fully comprehend. It's a bit scarier to think about. But then we have this other Levite, and his story is disturbing.

It is. It involves a concubine, a journey gone wrong, and a horrific act of violence. Right.

That sparks a civil war. This is one of those passages that's really tough to read. Absolutely.

This Levite and his concubine are traveling through Benjamin. Okay. And they end up seeking lodging in Gibeah.

Right. And that's where things take a terrifying turn. Yeah.

Wicked men in Gibeah surround the house and demand that the Levite hand over his concubine so they can assault her. It's just awful. It is.

It's a chilling echo of Sodom and Gomorrah. Wow. Reflecting the depths of depravity that had taken root in parts of Israel.

The Levite, in a misguided attempt to protect himself, sends his concubine out to the mob. Right. She is brutally abused and dies.

It's incredibly difficult to process. And it raises questions about the treatment of women, the nature of hospitality, and the devastating consequences of sin. The Levite, consumed by grief and seeking justice.

Right. Dismembers his concubine's body and sends the pieces to the other tribes of Israel. It's shocking, but it's meant to provoke outrage.

It is. And incite action. And it works.

It does. The other tribes are horrified and unite to wage war against the Benjaminites. Right.

Nearly wiping them out. Wow. This brutal conflict underscores the cyclical nature of violence.

It does. And the danger of unchecked sin. But what's fascinating.

Yeah. Is how this story, despite its darkness, might actually be setting the stage for the rise of the monarchy in Israel. That's right.

Because the first king of Israel, Saul. Yeah. Comes from the tribe of Benjamin.

So this story, with its focus on the near destruction of Benjamin and the need to rebuild the tribe, provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the emergence of Saul as king. Exactly. It's like the story is subtly hinting at the need for a stronger, more centralized leadership to prevent such chaos from happening again.

It's amazing how these seemingly isolated stories connect to broader themes and historical developments in the Bible. It is. Makes you wonder what other connections we might be missing.

That's the beauty of diving deep into scripture. There's always more to discover. So true.

Speaking of discoveries, let's move on to the Book of Ruth. Okay. This story offers a stark contrast to the violence and moral decay we've been discussing.

It does. It's like a breath of fresh air. Right.

A story of loyalty, love, and redemption. Yeah. Set against a backdrop of famine and loss.

Tell us about Naomi. Okay, Naomi is an Israelite woman. All right.

She, along with her husband and two sons, migrated to Moab to escape a famine. Okay. But tragedy strikes.

Oh. Her husband and both sons die, leaving Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Okay.

Ruth and Orpah alone and vulnerable. The names in this book are so significant. They are.

Elimelech, Naomi's husband, means My god is king. Which is ironic given the state of Israel at the time. Very much so.

Then there's Malan and Khilian, Naomi's sons. Yeah. Whose names mean weakly and sickly.

Yeah. Foreshadowing their deaths. Wow.

And Naomi herself embraces the name Mara, which means bitterness. Right. Reflecting her grief and despair.

It's as if their very names are hinting at the trials they'll face. Yeah. But amidst all this loss, we see an incredible act of loyalty from Ruth.

We do. She refuses to leave Naomi and return to her own people. Wow.

Her famous words, where you go, I will go; your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Powerful words. It's a testament to the strength of their bond.

It goes beyond friendship, though. Yeah. It's an example of that profound Hebrew concept of hesed, loyal love that perseveres through hardship, remaining steadfast even when facing adversity.

It's a quality that both Ruth and God himself demonstrate throughout the story. That's right. And speaking of God's hesed, he orchestrates a series of events that lead to Ruth's redemption.

She ends up gleaning in the fields of a wealthy landowner named Boaz. And his name Boaz means strength. Yes.

Which is fitting because he becomes a protector and provider for Ruth. Absolutely. He's a man of character and integrity.

A stark contrast to some of the figures we've seen in Judges. Right. And through a series of events that involve a little matchmaking from Naomi.

Uh-huh. And a somewhat unconventional proposal on the threshing floor. You know how it is.

Ruth and Boaz get married. They do. It's a beautiful picture of God's faithfulness, showing us how he can bring beauty from ashes.

And here's where it gets really interesting. Ruth, the Moabite widow, becomes the great-grandmother of King David. That's right.

So the Book of Ruth, just like the final chapters of Judges, points towards the future kingship of David. Hmm. Both books, in their own ways, set the stage for a new era in Israel's history.

Wow. It's incredible how these seemingly separate narratives are woven together. They are.

To create a larger tapestry of God's redemptive plan. It reminds us that even amidst chaos and suffering, God is at work, orchestrating events to fulfill his purposes. And sometimes those purposes unfold in the most unexpected and beautiful ways.

Absolutely. I think that's a great place to pause for now. Yeah, we've covered a lot of ground, but there's still much more to uncover.

Join us next time as we continue our deep dive into Judges and Ruth. It'll be great. Welcome back to the Deep Dive.

Last time we left off talking about Ruth and Boaz, and how their marriage set the stage for the Davidic dynasty. Talk about unexpected twists in the family tree. It really shows how God can work through the ordinary and unexpected.

Right. To achieve extraordinary things. Yeah, it's a good reminder for us to not underestimate the impact of our own choices.

That's true. But, you know, as I was reflecting on these stories, I was struck by how much the geography of ancient Israel played a role in shaping these events. Yeah, that's a great observation.

Dr. Hildebrandt really emphasizes that. The importance of geography throughout his lectures, particularly when we get to the stories of Samson and those two Levites. Right.

For example, many of Samson's feats of strength are tied to specific locations. Like when he carries those city gates all the way to Hebron. Oh, yeah.

That's no small feat, especially when you consider the terrain. Exactly. And think about the incident with the doorframe in Gaza.

Yeah. Dr. Hildebrandt points out that those ancient doorframes were massive. Oh, wow.

Heavy wooden beams. Not the lightweight doors we have today. So Samson wasn't just lifting a flimsy door.

He was hauling a major piece of architecture. It really drives home the superhuman strength he possessed. It does.

And remember, his strength wasn't just physical. It was directly connected to the spirit of God. Yeah.

We see this so often in the Old Testament when people accomplish these extraordinary things. Now, shifting to the story of the Levite and his concubine. Okay.

Their journey unfolds along that ridge route that runs down the spine of Israel. Yeah. You can almost picture them traveling along this ancient road.

Right. Traversing the hills and valleys of the region. I can.

And that route, which connected major cities like Bethel, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. Right. Wasn't just a scenic byway.

Yeah. It was a vital artery for travel and trade in ancient Israel. Absolutely.

But it also exposed travelers to dangers. Yeah. Especially in a time when there was so much lawlessness and tribal conflict.

The story mentions that the Levite avoids staying in Jebus, which later becomes Jerusalem. Right. Because it was inhabited by non-Israelites.

Yeah. It's a reminder of the tensions and conflicts. Yeah.

That simmered between the Israelites and other groups in the region. Right. And the fact that he ends up in Gibeah, a town within the territory of Benjamin.

Yeah. Adds another layer to this story. It does.

That's where the story takes that horrific turn. Right. Leading to the death of the concubine and the civil war.

It's almost as if the geography itself becomes a character. Wow. Shaping the choices people make and influencing the course of events.

Yeah. It really does make you think about how our physical surroundings, our environment, can play a role in our lives. Even if we don't always consciously realize it.

Absolutely. It emphasizes that the Bible isn't just a collection of abstract theological concepts. Right.

It's a story deeply rooted in a real time and place. Yeah. Understanding the geography, the culture, the political landscape.

All of that helps us grasp the deeper meaning and impact of these narratives. You know, as we're talking about the deeper meaning. Yeah.

I keep coming back to that Hebrew concept of Hesed. Right. Loyal love.

It's so central to the story of Ruth. It is. And even to how God interacts with his people throughout the Bible.

It's such a powerful concept. Can you imagine a society where Hesed? Yeah. This unwavering, steadfast love was the guiding principle in all relationships.

It's a beautiful ideal, but not always easy to live out. No, it's not. What makes Hesed so unique, and how is it different from just ordinary love or friendship? Well, Hesed is more than just warm feelings or good intentions.

Right. It's a love that's committed, enduring, and willing to sacrifice. Yes.

It's a love that perseveres through difficult times. Right. And remains steadfast even when facing adversity.

It's a love that takes action, wouldn't you say? Sure, sure. Like Ruth leaving her homeland. Yeah.

And pledging her loyalty to Naomi, even when it meant facing an uncertain future. Exactly. Or think about Boaz.

He shows hesed to Ruth by protecting her, providing for her, and ultimately by marrying her, even though she was a foreigner and a widow. These aren't just random acts of kindness. They're expressions of a deep, unwavering commitment.

Right. Rooted in love. It makes me think about my own relationships.

Right. Where do I see examples of hesed in my life? Right. And how can I better embody that kind of steadfast love towards others? Those are great questions for all of us to consider.

I think hesed is a powerful antidote. It is. To the self-centeredness and individualism that can often dominate our culture.

Yeah. It's a reminder that we're called to something higher, something more enduring than fleeting emotions or transactional relationships. It's about putting others' needs before our own, showing compassion.

Yeah. And remaining committed even when it's hard. It's not just about our relationships with other people.

Right. Hesed is also central to our understanding of God. Absolutely.

Throughout the Bible, we see God demonstrating his love towards his people. Yes. Even when they disobey him and turn away.

It's hard to fathom. Think about the Exodus, God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Right.

That's a powerful expression of hills. Or even during the time of the judges, when the Israelites are constantly falling into idolatry and chaos, God never abandons them. No, he doesn't.

He continues to send judges to deliver them, offering them opportunities to repent and return to him. It's a reminder that God's love for us is not based on our performance or how good we are. Yeah.

It's a love that's rooted in his very nature. For sure. A love that is unwavering and steadfast.

So as we reflect on these stories, the struggles, the triumphs, the complexities, it's clear that hesed is a thread that runs through it all. It's a love that challenges us, inspires us, and ultimately offers us hope. It does.

And it's a love that we're invited to participate in. Right. Both in how we receive it from God and how we extend it to others.

Welcome back to the Deep Dive. We've journeyed through the world of judges and Ruth. We have.

Encountering ambition, betrayal, rash vows, and even divine sarcasm. It's been quite a ride. It has.

We've also seen incredible displays of loyalty. Right. Redemption and that powerful Hebrew concept of hesed.

A love that endures through thick and thin. A love that never gives up. So as we wrap up, what are some key takeaways from these stories that we can apply to our own lives? What resonated with you the most? I think one of the biggest takeaways for me is the danger of making hasty decisions.

Okay. Especially when it comes to promises or vows. Jeff, the story really brings that point home.

It does. His vow made in the heat of the moment had tragic consequences. Right.

Consequences he could never have imagined. It's a cautionary tale for all of us, isn't it? I think so. We live in a world that often prizes speed and impulsiveness.

Yeah. Instant gratification. But Jeff, this story reminds us to slow down, to seek wise counsel, and to carefully consider the potential impact of our choices.

Right. Before we make promises we might regret. It's about being thoughtful and intentional, not just reactive.

What other insights jumped out at you from these stories? Well, I think these stories also push us to examine our own hearts and motivations. Okay. We see it in Abimelech's thirst for power.

Yeah. Samson's weakness for women. Right.

And even in Jephthah's rash vow, it's easy to judge them from a distance. But how often do our own desires and ambitions lead us down the wrong path? It's a good reminder to be honest with ourselves about our weaknesses. Yeah.

To seek accountability from those we trust. For sure. And to rely on something bigger than ourselves to navigate those temptations.

Definitely. Speaking of navigating challenges. Yeah.

I was struck by how often the characters' circumstances shape their view of God, for better or worse. You're right. Naomi's journey through bitterness and loss certainly colored her perspective.

It did. It's natural to question God's goodness when life throws curveballs our way. Yeah.

We've all been there. But then we have Ruth. Right.

Whose story shows us that even in the midst of suffering, God's steadfast, loyal love never wavers. It's a powerful reminder that faith isn't about having all the answers or avoiding hardship. Right.

It's about trusting in God's character, even when our circumstances don't make sense. Absolutely. And it's a trust that's often reflected in our actions, even seemingly small ones.

Like Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi. It was a simple act of loyalty and selflessness. Yeah.

But who could have predicted it would lead to her becoming the great-grandmother of King David? It highlights how those everyday choices, the ones that might seem insignificant at the time. Right. Can have a ripple effect on the world around us.

They do. Shaping not only our own lives, but the lives of those who come after us. And that brings us to a final thought for you to consider.

As we wrap up this deep dive, think about the ripples you're creating in your own life. What legacy are you building through your choices, your actions, your relationships? Wow. How are you shaping the world around you for better or for worse? It's a powerful question, one that invites us to live with intention and purpose.

It does. Recognizing that even seemingly small acts can have a profound impact. Absolutely.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the world of Judges and Ruth. It's been great. We hope it's sparked some new insights and inspired you to keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep seeking wisdom as you navigate your own journey.