

# Major Lessons From The Minor Judges

**Introduction.** This lesson focuses on six men -- six buried men. They are all buried in graves and tombs throughout the land of Israel. They are also "buried" in the Old Testament, specifically in the book of Judges. Sadly, these six men have been relegated to obscurity. Yet they are real men of Hebrew history, men chosen by God in His unfolding scheme of redemption.

Of course, I speak of the "minor judges" which include Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon (Judges 3:31; 10:1-5; 12:8-15). It is true that there is little preserved of them in Scripture. When compared to such giants as Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson, they do at first glance appear to be insignificant. Yet I am persuaded that we can learn some "major lessons" from these "minor judges."

## I. ***No One Is Exempt From Serving God***

- A. Shamgar battled the Philistines with an ox goad. It is very likely that he was just a poor farmer or a peasant (Judges 3:31).
- B. Jair was a man of great wealth and authority. Jair had 30 sons. Each son had a donkey (a sign of wealth and status back then) and each son was assigned his own city. The author of Judges notes that these 30 cities were known as "Havoth-jair" or the "towns of Jair." It is one thing to have a town named after you. It is quite another thing for a whole group of towns to be named after you, and for the name to stick (Judges 10:3-5).
- C. Ibzan had 60 children (30 sons and 30 daughters). Apparently, he was wealthy enough to arrange marriages from abroad for his sons and to send his daughters abroad for their marriages (whether this was in or out of Israel is unknown). What is certain is that he, like Jair, was rich and influential (Judges 12:8-10).
- D. Abdon, who also had a large family (40 sons and 30 grandsons), was also probably a man of great wealth and status. His 70 descendants each had a donkey (Judges 12:13-15). Since this was an expensive mode of transportation back then, the closest equivalent for today would be for a modern-day grandfather buying all his sons and grandsons a brand-new car.
- E. The point is very simple. Everyone can (and must) serve God. No one is exempt. Whether rich or poor, peasant farmer or wealthy nobleman, these men rendered service that was acceptable and blessed by God. They understood that their talents and possessions ultimately belonged to the Lord and were to be used for Him (Ecclesiastes 9:10; John 9:4; Colossians 3:17, 22-25).

## II. ***Serve God Even If You Feel Insignificant***

- A. In his book *Antiquities of the Jews*, the Jewish historian, Josephus, says of Ibsan, "He did nothing in the seven years of his administration that was worth recording, or deserved a memorial." Of Elon, Josephus says, "Neither did Elon ... do anything remarkable." Of Abdon, he writes, "He is only recorded to have been happy in his children; for the public affairs were then so peaceable, and in such security, that neither did he perform any glorious action ... he died an old man, and obtained a magnificent burial." Rather than looking to ourselves and asking to be excused (Luke 14:18-20), we need to look to God and get to work.
- B. The feeble excuse, "But I am just a nobody," sounds a lot like Moses (Exodus 3:11). God did not accept that excuse then and He will not accept it today. It has been said that the life of Moses can be divided into three parts:
  - 1. Moses thought he was really somebody.
  - 2. Moses learned that he was really nobody.
  - 3. Moses learned what God can do with a nobody.
- C. This excuse, "But I am just a nobody," could have been used by the any one of the minor judges -- even the apostle Paul himself (1 Corinthians 15:9-10; Ephesians 3:8; 2 Corinthians 12:11) -- but they all determined to serve God in their generation.
- D. If these six men really were just a bunch of nobodies, then God would have excluded them from the Bible and it would be 14 verses shorter than it is. However, these men were part of God's plan at that time and so are we.

## III. ***Serve God With The Talents You Have***

- A. Shamgar was probably a contemporary of Jael and is mentioned in Deborah's victory song (Judges 5:6). The fact that she mentions him indicates that he was held in high esteem in the land. His war instrument was an ox goad which was a farming tool. Generally, it was about eight feet long with a sharp metal spike at one end to prod animals to work. Shamgar used this humble agricultural implement in battle against Philistia. The 600 Philistines that Shamgar slew may refer to either a single battle engagement or the total number slain throughout his judgeship (Judges 3:31).
- B. As we consider Shamgar and his humble weapon, let us allow the lesson of his ox-goad to "prod" us to acknowledge the fact that there is room in God's kingdom for the "small things" that we can do (Luke 16:10; Matthew 25:21). Sometimes, we may feel that unless we hear the blowing of trumpet fanfares and the cheering of crowds, then we are unworthy to even get started. Yet, at the

end of time, when every account is rendered, we may very well find that the greatest deeds were done quietly and unassumingly, far distant from the limelight (Matthew 10:40-42; Luke 21:1-4).

- C. Moses' rod was a simple shepherd's tool, but what great things God accomplished through it (Exodus 4:1-5)! There is a little saying that goes, "It is not what you would do tomorrow, if a million should be your lot; but what you are doing now with the dollar and quarter you have got!"

#### IV. ***Serve God With Courage And Desire***

- A. Tola, we are told, was of the tribe of Issachar (Judges 10:1-2). He "arose" to defend or save Israel. He was a volunteer who offered his leadership talents in willing service. It appears that Tola did not wait to be sought out by his fellow Israelites. Neither did he wait for them to throng around him and beg him to do what was necessary. Tola saw the need; he arose; he saved Israel. What a champion!
- B. Shamgar faced 600 armed pagan soldiers with a lowly farm tool. His bravery and courage are obvious.
- C. We need more people like Tola and Shamgar. We need more who will arise and fight voluntarily (Jude 3). Remember, there are no draftees in the church (Psalm 110:3). From Pentecost until the return of Christ, people continued to "volunteer freely" and present themselves as freewill offerings before God (Romans 12:1-2). Is your service forced and begrudged? Or is it voluntary as it ought to be?
- D. It is not always popular to stand against ungodliness. In fact, it is frequently very tempting to "go with the flow" and look for the easy way out. However, the easy way is rarely the right way. We must be constant in our service to God and refuse to waver in our convictions (2 Timothy 1:7-8; 1 Corinthians 16:13). Is your service timid and hesitant? Or is it courageous as it ought to be?

#### V. ***Even Ordinary Men Can Be Heroes***

- A. It is interesting to note what did not occur during the respective administrations of the minor judges. There were no great invasions or mass oppression from heathen forces. Neither were there any civil wars brewing or igniting. The land was at peace. Tola judged in peace for 23 years; Jair, 22; Elon, 10; Abdon, 8; Ibzan, 7. The length of Shamgar's judgeship is unknown, although Josephus speculates that he died during his first year as judge.
- B. A "hero" is "a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities." How can these six men be considered heroes? Any

time a man performs regular, routine, even ordinary service to God -- voluntarily and without complaint -- such a man should be commended! These six men kept the peace and kept the faith in their time. They exerted a positive influence on those around them. Is there nothing noble about that? Is there nothing admirable in stemming the tide of sin and apostasy in one's own time?

- C. It may be that much of the cause of our discouragement lies in the fact that we feel our service in the Lord's vineyard is regular, routine, and ordinary (1 Corinthians 15:58; Galatians 6:9).

**Conclusion.** At least five major lessons can be learned at the feet of these six "minor" judges. But Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon are preserved in scripture for a reason. These six ordinary, obscure men are like Abel in that they being dead, yet speak (Hebrews 11:4). They tell us that it is not necessary that our service be recognized and awarded by men; if God takes note and is pleased, it is enough! The world may look upon our lives and snort in disgust, but we do not pant after worldly fame and acclaim (Galatians 1:10). We live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God and long to hear His thrilling invitation to that heavenly country (Matthew 4:4; Hebrews 11:16).