

What Went Wrong

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 1:1-2:5

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Why Judges?

This morning we begin a new series in the book of Judges. This series will be a bit of a contrast to the series we just finished. Our series on *koinonia* was a topical series—one topic with many texts. Judges will be an expository series—one book with many topics. Our series on *koinonia* was a pastoral response to a perceived need in this church—a struggle to connect. But I've not chosen Judges in response to any specific crisis I've seen. So why study Judges? Well for one, at First Free we're committed to studying, as Paul said, the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). We believe that all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for God's people (2 Tim. 3:16). All Scripture, even Judges, has lasting relevance for our lives. While we believe, from time to time, it's appropriate to address specific needs in the body through topical preaching, we believe that the best spiritual diet for God's people should be working through books of the Bible sequentially, Old Testament and New Testament. Working through books of the Bible like Judges may not be the food we would choose, but it provides us with a balanced diet.

But this isn't an "eat your vegetables" approach. I think you'll find that Judges is highly relevant for us in the church. Many commentators have said that the book of Judges is all about the Canaanization of Israel.¹ Israel didn't obey God's covenant to drive out the Canaanites. So they lived among the Canaanites. Over the course of time they became more and more like the Canaanites. One commentator in particular says that the Canaanization of Israel provides us with the key to the relevance of this ancient book to North American Christianity.

For like the Israelites of the settlement period, we have largely forgotten the covenant Lord and have come to take for granted his gracious redemptive work on our behalf. Like the ancient Israelites we too are being squeezed into the mold of the pagan world around us. Evidences of the "Canaanization" of the church are everywhere: our preoccupation with material prosperity, which turns Christianity into a fertility religion; our syncretistic and aberrant forms of worship; our refusal to obey the Lord's call to separation from the world; our divisiveness and competitiveness; our moral compromises, as a result of which Christians and non-Christians are often indistinguishable; our [male] exploitation and abuse of women and children; our reluctance to answer the Lord's call to service, and when we finally go, our propensity to displace "Thy kingdom come" with "My kingdom come"; our eagerness to fight the Lord's battles with the world's resources and strategies; our willingness to stand up and defend perpetrators of evil instead of justice. These and many other lessons will be drawn from the leaves of this fascinating book as we proceed.²

Tim Keller says that Judges shows us that spiritual decline is inevitable. But it also shows us that spiritual renewal is a continual need of the church.³ So it's negative, but there's a positive side as well!

¹ Block, Daniel Isaac. *Judges, Ruth*. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999.

² Block

³ Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purceyville, Va: The Good Book Co, 2013.

Joshua and Judges

Well, without further ado, let's jump into Judges. It picks up right where we left off in Joshua, 18 months ago. Joshua set the Israelites up for driving out the Canaanites. Judges lets us see how Israel fared after Joshua's death. As you'll notice in our passage, they start out well, but then things start to go south. This leads us to the question we want to answer this morning: "What went wrong?"⁴ We get hints of what went wrong along the way, but then, if there was any question, we're given an explicit answer in 2:1-5.

Judges 1:1-26; 2:1-5⁵

¹After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" ²The LORD said, "Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand." ³And Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me into the territory allotted to me, that we may fight against the Canaanites. And I likewise will go with you into the territory allotted to you." So Simeon went with him. ⁴Then Judah went up and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they defeated 10,000 of them at Bezek. ⁵They found Adoni-bezek at Bezek and fought against him and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. ⁶Adoni-bezek fled, but they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and his big toes. ⁷And Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table. As I have done, so God has repaid me." And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.

⁸And the men of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire. ⁹And afterward the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, in the Negeb, and in the lowland. ¹⁰And Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (now the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba), and they defeated Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai.

¹¹From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. The name of Debir was formerly Kiriath-sepher. ¹²And Caleb said, "He who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give him Achsah my daughter for a wife." ¹³And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it. And he gave him Achsah his daughter for a wife. ¹⁴When she came to him, she urged him to ask her father for a field. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you want?" ¹⁵She said to him, "Give me a blessing. Since you have set me in the land of the Negeb, give me also springs of water." And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

¹⁶And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negeb near Arad, and they went and settled with the people. ¹⁷And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath and devoted it to destruction. So the name of the city was called Hormah. ¹⁸Judah also captured Gaza with its territory, and Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. ¹⁹And the LORD was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron. ²⁰And Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said. And he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. ²¹But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem, so the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.

²²The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel, and the LORD was with them. ²³And the house of Joseph scouted out Bethel. (Now the name of the city was formerly Luz.) ²⁴And the spies saw a man coming out of the city, and they said to him, "Please show us the way into the city, and we will deal kindly with you." ²⁵And he showed them the way into the city. And they struck the city with the edge of the sword, but they let the man and all his family go. ²⁶And the man went to the land of the Hittites and built a city and called its name Luz. That is its name to this day.

⁴ This title is adapted from Webb, Barry G. *Judges and Ruth: God in Chaos*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway 2015.

⁵ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®] unless otherwise noted.

2:1 Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, ‘I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, ²and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? ³So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.’ ⁴As soon as the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. ⁵And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD.

This is the Word of the Lord.

As I said earlier, Judges 1 starts out well. The Israelites are fulfilling the Lord’s covenant; they’re conquering the land of Canaan as commanded. But conquest leads to chaos in this chapter. What went wrong? To answer that question this morning, I want to start by looking at the initial success of Israel in verses 1-18. Then I want to look at the increased failure in verses 19-36. Finally, we’ll look at God’s answer to our question this morning in 2:1-5. Here we’re told explicitly what went wrong.

INITIAL SUCCESS (1:1-18)

Let’s start with the initial success of Israel in 1:1-18. In order to understand Israel’s initial success (and subsequent failure), we first have to understand exactly what they were called to do. We learn about Israel’s marching orders for their conquest of Canaan in Joshua. Turn back in your Bible a few pages to Joshua 23. In verse 5, we learn that the Lord makes a promise to Israel. “The LORD your God will push [the Canaanites] back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you.” So we see right out of the shoot that it’s God who will do the fighting and secure the victory. But as verse 6 begins to tell us, Israel has a role to play. They’re called to “be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left.” Israel was called to be courageous. But their courage is a matter of faith in their God. They weren’t able to conquer Canaan in their own strength, but in the strength that God would give them. Their success was dependent on trusting God’s promises and being faithful to God’s precepts. Their victory would be largely a matter of faith.

The specifics of this faith and faithfulness are spelled out in the verses that follow. They were to “not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them, but you shall cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day. For the LORD has driven out before you great and strong nations. And as for you, no man has been able to stand before you to this day.” Success in the conquest would not be easy. But it also wasn’t dependent on Israel. They needed to trust God and be faithful to him. This teaches us that power belongs to God alone; we’re called to ask for and exercise God’s power by faith.⁶

And that’s how things begin. Israel begins by asking the LORD where the battle should begin. “Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them” (v. 1)? Their question is directed to the LORD who has the power to secure their victory. The LORD says that Judah is the first to go up for “I have given the land into his hand” (v. 2). And Judah acts in courageous faith and

⁶ Jackman, David. *Judges, Ruth*. Dallas, Tex: Word Books, 1993.

faithfulness. They go up and fight against the Canaanites at Bezek. And the LORD gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands like he promised (v. 4). Judah trusted God and the LORD did what he promised he would do. The same thing happened at Jerusalem and in the Negeb, and in Hebron, and in Debir (vv. 8-10). At Debir the author narrows the focus for us so we can see a model of courageous faith and faithfulness (vv. 11-15). Caleb offers his daughter Achsah to the man who captures Debir (v. 12). As Tim Keller says, Caleb is looking for a husband for his daughter who is like him—a man of covenant faithfulness and courageous obedience in response to God’s promises.⁷ Othniel responds to the challenge and captures Debir (v. 13). Othniel displays courageous faith. And Achsah also displays faith. She shows that she’s her father’s daughter (cf. Josh. 14). She asks for springs of water in her allotment and it was given to her (vv. 14-15). As God’s people display faith and faithfulness, he wants to bless them. And that’s what we see with Caleb, Othniel, and Achsah. They’re a picture of the right response to God’s promises. It’s no coincidence that Othniel is the first and ideal judge in this book.

We see throughout the Scriptures the same lesson we learn here in the first part of Judges 1. We know that we’re called to toil in making disciples, but it’s with all of God’s energy that he powerfully works in us (Col. 1:29). We know that we’re called to obey, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, [but] it’s God who works in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13). Power belongs to God alone, but we’re called to ask for and exercise it by faith. This is what we see in the initial success of Judah in verses 1-18.

INCREASED FAILURE (1:19-36)

But things start to go downhill after this. Let’s now look at Israel’s failure in verse 19-36. In verse 19, we’re told that the LORD was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country. But he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron. What went wrong? Instead of placing their confidence in God’s power, they became afraid of the iron chariots of those in the hill country. In Joshua 17:18 God told the people, “The hill country shall be yours...For you shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong.” God had promised that they could take the hill country, through God’s strength. But they took their eyes off of God, and like Peter after them, they began to sink.⁸ This is what we learn. When we will not ask for and exercise God’s power, we are faithless.

Can’t or Won’t

Israel believed that they could not drive out the inhabitants because of the strength of the Canaanites; therefore, they did not drive them out. When we believe that God cannot, it leads to our will not.⁹ David Jackman believes this is the interpretive key to the rest of the chapter.¹⁰ I think he’s right. Throughout verses 27 to 36, we’re told repeatedly that the various tribes of Israel did not drive out the inhabitants of the land. It wasn’t that they could not. It’s that they did not. One of the reasons we know this is because we’re also told in verse 28 that when Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely. If they were strong enough to put the Canaanites to forced labor, then they were strong enough to drive them completely out of the land. But they would not. This is what went wrong.

⁷ Keller

⁸ Jackman

⁹ Jackman; Keller

¹⁰ Jackman

It's worth stopping at this point and asking a question of ourselves. "Where am I saying, 'I can't' but God is saying, 'You won't?'" Israel's failure to obey was based on what they saw as good reasons—God said they were flimsy excuses. Why? Because "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Cor. 10:13). God will never put us in a position where we cannot obey him. There's never a real "I can't" moment.¹¹ But our lives are full of "I won't" moments.

What are the things in your life that you think you're unable to do that you're actually refusing to do? Maybe there's a person in your life that you don't think you can forgive. But God commands us to forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven us. And God enables what he requires. Maybe there's an area where you know you need to step up and serve in the church, but you don't think you can right now. Is it truly a can't or is it a won't. What about a certain temptation that you're facing. Are you saying, "I can't resist this temptation?" God says he'll provide you a way out. So is it really a can't or is it in fact a won't?¹²

GOD'S ANSWER (2:1-5)

One of the reasons we know the Israelites weren't acting in faith is because God tells us they weren't. We've been asking the question this morning, "What went wrong." We've started to get an answer to this question in the second section of our passage. We're given an explicit answer in the third section. Let's look now at 2:1-5. In verse 1 we're told that the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. Earlier we were told that Judah went up to fight against the Canaanites (1:2, 4). Later we're told that Joseph went up against Bethel (1:22). Now we're told that the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. The Israelites were given a job to do; they were to go up against the Canaanites. Now the LORD gives them a job review, he goes up to talk to them.¹³ They went up to attack the Canaanites. The LORD goes up to attack them.¹⁴ What is God's evaluation of the Israelites' conquest so far? He starts by saying that he has kept his end of the covenant. He brought them up out of Egypt. He brought them into the land that he promised. He promised he wouldn't break his covenant with them (v. 1). And he hasn't. He then goes on to remind them that they were called to keep his covenant with him and not make covenants with the inhabitants of the land. And they were called to break down the altars to Baal and Asherah in the land. But they did not obey his voice. They would not drive the Canaanites and their gods out of the land! In verse 2 the LORD says, "What is this you have done?" This is an allusion to what God said to Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen. 3:13).¹⁵ Then in verse 3, God says, "So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you."

Israel was called to drive the Canaanites completely out of the land. They were called to devote them to destruction. This wasn't because God is mean. The Canaanites deserved God's judgment on them. We saw this in our series in Joshua.¹⁶ They had centuries to repent, but they didn't. In verse 7, we see that even the pagan king Adoni-bezek understood that his judgment was deserved. But that's not the only reason they were to be devoted to complete destruction. The other reason was because God knew that if they didn't completely devote them to destruction and destroy their false gods that their false gods would become a snare to Israel. If they didn't completely rid the land of paganism, eventually Israel would worship the pagan gods. If you leave a bad apple in the bunch, eventually the

¹¹ Keller

¹² Adapted from Keller

¹³ This structural observation comes from Webb, Barry G. *The Book of Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.

¹⁴ Jackman

¹⁵ Younger, K. Lawson. *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002.

¹⁶ Black, Josh. "[Salvation through Judgment: Joshua 6:1-27](#)," Sermon, May 17, 2015.

whole bunch will go bad. And that's exactly what happened. The rest of the book of Judges shows this is what happened. But all of this could have been avoided.

The basic picture we have in this first introduction to Judges is a picture of partial obedience and half-hearted discipleship.¹⁷ The Israelites only partially conquered Canaan. The Israelites only partially obeyed God. They trusted him to a degree, but they largely took matters into their own hands. They didn't completely reject God. But they didn't completely accept him either. And this led to exactly what God said it would lead to. As they mixed with the false gods of Canaan, they eventually worshiped the false gods. This teaches us that because God loves his people, we're called to whole-hearted, not half-hearted, discipleship. God knows what's best for the people and he wants them to experience his blessings. But when we won't trust him completely, and when we won't obey him completely, we forfeit his blessings. When the Israelites were confronted with this, they lifted their voice and wept and offered sacrifices to God (vv. 4-5). And so the name of the place was called Bochim, which means weepers. This is a picture of repentance. But even their repentance was half-hearted. For we know that the fruit of whole-hearted repentance is a change of heart and a change of life. But the rest of the book of Judges shows us that Israel didn't maintain a change of heart or a change of life. In fact, the picture we see here, though bad, is only the beginning of the downward spiral of Israel. We need to give God our whole heart, in faith, in life, and in repentance.

We've said that the book of Judges is all about the Canaanization of Israel. But that's only part of the story. In some ways, the more fundamental theme of Judges is the patient mercy of God.¹⁸ It's about the long-suffering salvation God gives his people. After repeated failures, and during a cycle of increasingly dark degradation, God continued to deliver his people. We are sometimes quite faithless. But God is faithful to his covenant. The failure of Israel, and even the failure of the judges we will meet in the following chapters, can be discouraging. But Judges is for our instruction, to teach us how (not) to live (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6, 11). But more importantly, they all point to Christ, the one who was faithful and completely obedient to his Father. If we are in Christ, we are a part of the new covenant in his blood. And God will be faithful to his covenant. In spite of our failure, he will be faithful to finish what he has started in us (Phil. 1:6). We're called to work out our faith in fear and trembling. But thanks be to God that he will work in us both to will and to work according to his good pleasure. Let us surrender all to Christ, with the strength that God has given.

¹⁷ Keller

¹⁸ Webb, *The Book of Judges*