

Week 1 - Compromise is Costly - Judges 1:1-2:5

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 7:1-11

Introduction

This morning we are beginning a study of the book of Judges that will likely take us through the first half of the year

Judges is one of the books in the Bible that doesn't get a whole lot of attention in local churches probably because it's a kind of strange book that contains more than its fair share of violence and deviance

It talks about places that are largely unfamiliar to us and nations that have by and large passed off the scene of history

Judges continues where Joshua leaves off with the themes of conquest and occupation of the land

That raises again the whole issue of God ordering the wholesale slaughter of the Canaanites by Israel so as to take their land - an act that offends modern sensibilities

And the people we meet in the accounts Judges contains can't exactly be considered good role models as they are all deeply flawed individuals

All in all, Judges can be kind of a downer as we witness the steady, cyclical slide of Israel and there is no "happily ever after" in it

For those reasons, and others, I think most pastors would just as soon skip Judges to preach on something else

How's that for a new series sales pitch?

Hearing all that, you might well wonder why I would choose to preach through Judges - and that's a fair question

You'll find at least a part of my reason in the subtitle for the sermons series: **Fallible People; Faithful God**

I often point out to you that mankind, for all of our intellectual and technological advances, really hasn't changed all that much from the people we read about in the pages of the Bible

And that's true when it comes to the people we will meet in Judges - things really haven't changed all that much

One of the recurring lines we will encounter in Judges is that "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" which is an apt description of our day

Our days are just as dark and uncertain as those of the time of the Judges as we also find ourselves in the midst of pagans lured toward pagan practices commanded by God to not allow those things to reign in our lives

And, far too often, we fail the to be faithful and find ourselves immersed in difficulties of our own making

But, thankfully, God has still not changed [**James 1:17**] and he is as faithful to his children today as he was to Israel in the time of the Judges - a fact that should encourage us

We should also be encouraged by the fact that the men and women God uses to rescue Israel throughout the book are far from perfect

God delights in using people with flaws and weaknesses to do mighty things

If we had to rely on our own faithfulness we would be doomed but through the accounts we find in the book of Judges we see that it isn't so much our faithfulness that makes the difference but God's

And that gives us the assurance that God's plans will prevail in spite of us and all of our flaws

There will often be times when we are tempted to look down on Israel with the superiority of historical perspective and wonder how they could be so blind, so weak, and so insistent in doing wrong

But, when those temptations come, we need to allow the Word of God to be a mirror in which we examine ourselves and see how we are just like them in so many ways

And then rejoice every time that God demonstrates his loving faithfulness in sending a judge to deliver them because we too are fallible people who need a faithful God

I want to take some time, before we get into our outline for this morning, to set the scene for the book of Judges

The Children of Israel were led out of Egyptian captivity by Moses but balked at the prospect of entering the land when ten out of twelve spies reported the difficult nature of conquering the land

Therefore, God sentenced them to wander in the desert for 40 years until all that were left of that generation were the two spies who had encouraged the people to go and take the land, Joshua and Caleb

Joshua took over leadership of Israel upon the death of Moses and the book that bears his name is a record of the success Israel had in conquering the Canaanites and taking the land

And Judges begins in 1:1 with the words, *“After the death of Joshua”*

New beginnings are often precipitated by the earthly end of God’s servants:

Exodus begins with the death of Joseph

Joshua begins with the death of Moses

Judges begins with the death of Joshua

1 Kings begins with the death of David

The death of a strong central leader commonly brings about great change - change that isn’t always 100% positive - and yet God’s kingdom and God’s purposes continue even though the servants of God die

That’s the witness of Judges as God continued to work out his plan for and through his people

Still, while Joshua and Judges stand side-by-side in the Bible and on the timeline of history, they couldn’t be further apart in what they show us

Joshua is the record of the success of Israel as they trusted the Lord and obeyed God - it’s a record of Israel’s faith

Judges, on the other hand, is a long, sad account of defeat brought about through Israel’s unbelief and disobedience

Joshua depicts a people united behind God’s man while Judges shows us a people divided as every man did what was right in his own eyes

And in Joshua, God’s Word is central and the people submitted to God’s authority, but in Judges the Word is neglected and even rejected

Two verses show this contrast quite starkly

After Joshua had issued his challenge to “choose this day whom you will serve” the people answered in **Joshua 24:16** – *Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods...*

But then Joshua died and in short order we read in **Judges 3:7** –

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God...

Also, as we are going to see quite early on, there is a vast difference between “taking” or “conquering” the land and “possessing” the land

To “take” the land refers to the initial conquest of a territory - something the Israelites were quite successful at - while “possessing” the land refers to the permanent occupation and control of the conquered territory

And that’s going to prove to be the problem of the book of Judges

One more thing that I want to point out before we dig into our passage is that the events covered in Judges take place over a span of 300-350 years - ¼ of O.T. history - a point that we could easily miss while simply reading through the book

So, with that background established, let’s dig into our passage where we will first see that Israel had **initial success** followed by **subsequent failures** leading to the **consequence of compromise**

I. Initial Success

The book begins on a positive note as we read in the first verse that **[Judges 1:1]** –

After 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?”

Their inquiry upon the death of their leader is a positive sign for a couple of reasons

First, it shows their continued dependence on God

They sought to obtain a declaration of the divine will before they took action

Second, the fact that they asked who would go up first against the Canaanites presupposes there will be a series of further campaigns by the other individual tribes but their inquiry of the Lord indicates that Israel was still united

They are still “us” at that point in time

So, they come together to inquire of the Lord and in verse 2 we read that the Lord picked Judah to go up first along with the promise *“I have given the land into his hand”*

The people were faithful to inquire of the Lord and the Lord gave them not only the guidance they sought but also assurance of success

And we see in the verses that follow that Judah, along with his brother, Simeon, enjoyed initial success at the hand of God

We see the Lord give them victory over the Canaanites and the Perizzites at Bezek in verses 4-7

Then, in verse 8, we see them capture Jerusalem

Then they continued on into the hill country to take Hebron, Debir, and Zephath before taking the coastal plain territory

Sadly, that was the extent of the record of success as we see only failure from here on

But, before we get to that, there is an interesting anecdote inserted into the narrative that I want to touch on

Look with me at verses 11-15 **[Judges 1:11-15]** –

From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. The name of Debir was formerly Kiriath-sepher. And Caleb said, “He who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give him Achsah my daughter for a wife.” And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, captured it. And he gave him Achsah his daughter for a wife. When 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?” She 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.

While we might find it odd, perhaps even offensive, that Caleb offered his daughter as a prize to a man as a reward for a job well done, we can’t apply modern ideas of romance gender roles onto ancient times when marriages were arranged

It’s likely that Caleb’s daughter was honored to be given in marriage to a military hero like Othniel

However, the account does record an exchange that is interesting when we see Achsah encourage her new husband to ask her father to provide them with a field

And, while the passage doesn’t indicate that Othniel took her advice, we do see that Caleb had given them a piece of land - but it was desert land of little use without water

So Achsah did something quite bold as she asked her father to also give her land that contained springs of water

And we see Caleb honor her far-sighted and resourceful request for a blessing

We might well wonder why the author of Judges decided to insert this account into a recitation of military victories and I don’t want to belabor it or spend a great deal of time on what lessons could be learned from it as it isn’t our focus

But I do appreciate these kinds of little asides and details that reveal how much God cares about small details

The author summarizes Judah's initial success in verse 19 saying: *"And the Lord was with Judah"*

And in verse 20 we see that Caleb was successful in driving out the inhabitants of Hebron

And in verse 22 we see that the Lord was with the house of Joseph and they had success when they attacked Bethel

However, that was the end of the success and from here we see only failures

II. Subsequent Failures

First, sandwiched between the successes of Caleb and the house of Joseph, we see that Benjamin failed to dislodge the Jebusites living in Jerusalem

This seemingly odd arrangement becomes understandable when we recognize that, beginning with Judah and Simeon in the south, the author is simply working his way northward in his mention of the various tribes

Next in line, then, is Manasseh, who "did not drive out the inhabitants

Then Ephraim, who did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer

Likewise, the failures of Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali appear in south-to-north order

Lastly, the author writes about Dan, the northernmost tribe

The territory allotted to Dan was just a small strip of land along the Aijalon Valley, sandwiched between Judah and Ephraim

And we see recorded here that the Danites were unable to make any inroads into the lowland region as they were rebuffed by the resident Amorites, who forced them back into the hill country

The humiliation of Dan was a complete reversal of fortunes and the rock bottom of failure on the part of Israel

However, to have a proper understanding, we need to be sure that we recognize the nature of their failure

For the most part, Israel didn't fail when it came to "taking" the land

Their failure was in "possessing" the land

Let's look back at what God commanded Israel to do when they went into the land that he was giving them

Look again at **Deuteronomy 7:1-5** from our Scripture reading, where we see God command through Moses:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.

I want you to focus your attention on verse 2 [**Deuteronomy 7:2**]

When the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show mercy to them.

God was going to give the inhabitants of the land into the hands of Israel, but God wasn't going to do it all for them

God promised them victory - that they would take the land - but he commanded them to possess the land fully by continuing to battle until they had completely wiped out their enemies

Simply put, God wasn't giving Israel the land so that they could live alongside its current residents - Israel was to conquer the land and destroy all the nations within the borders of Canaan

Many people question the propriety of a loving God commanding the complete destruction of a people

But we need to recognize just who the Canaanites were

Look at what God said through Moses in **Deuteronomy 18:9-14** to see a partial list of what the Canaanites were guilty of

“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.”

If you want to see a longer list, look to Leviticus 18, where the entire chapter is devoted to their abominable practices

The conquest of the land and the destruction of the people who lived there was to be God’s justice, and Israel was to be the instrument of God’s justice on a perverted and corrupt people

And the motivation for removing the Canaanites from the land wasn’t pragmatic but spiritual

The Canaanites weren’t so much a military threat as a spiritual cancer

As God told Moses in **Exodus 23:33** –

They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

That’s why Israel was to eliminate the inhabitants from the land and destroy all of their worship centers

But Israel didn’t do that

They were more like the surgeon who removed only a part of the cancerous tumor in his patient while declaring that even cancer has a right to exist

Six times in Judges 1, we read how Israel “did not drive out” the people out of the land

And sometimes, even when they had the upper hand, they refused to carry out God’s agenda

Four times, we read that Israel instead subjected their enemies to forced labor in direct disobedience to God’s command

Even Judah, who had the initial success, was guilty of mutilating their captive king rather than putting him to death as God commanded -

Meaning that they immediately fell into practicing a Canaanite ritual, as evidenced by the admission of Adoni-bezek that he had done the same to those he had defeated, rather than obey God

Israel compromised

Instead of making the land God had given them into the land of the people of God, they almost immediately began to become like the people of the land

And as we will see next compromise comes with consequences

III. Consequence of Compromise

The nature of the narrative changes as chapter 2 opens as the author completes his recitation of Israel’s failure to possess the land that God had given them and announces the appearance of a messenger from God

And this messenger from God begins with an indictment against Israel that is projected against a backdrop of God’s gracious actions on the nation’s behalf

God had delivered Israel from captivity in Egypt

God had brought them safely into the promised land

God had promised to keep his covenant with their ancestors - and he had fulfilled it

And, in all of his actions toward Israel, God had acted graciously

The initiative was all God's while the privilege of benefiting from God's kindness was all Israel's

But God also had expectations of his people

And the messenger cites two things that God commanded [**Judges 2:2a**]:

You shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land

And

You shall break down their altars

God prohibited making alliances or agreements with the inhabitants of the land

Yet we see a clear breach of this prohibition in the case of the house of Joseph making a deal with the man from Bethel in 1:24 not to mention the general willingness of the various tribes to come to terms with the Canaanites in chapter 1

We'll see the failure of Israel to destroy the worship centers of the Canaanites next week

But in the last part of verse 2 [**Judges 2:2**] we see the messenger of God issue God's indictment against Israel

But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this that you have done?

In light of all that God had done for Israel, any demands put upon them by God should have been received and obeyed with joy

But, instead, Israel disobeyed the revealed will of God and God's messenger forces Israel to reflect on their actions before issuing God's just response in verse 3 [**Judges 2:3**]

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.

We need to recognize that this wasn't an impulsive action on God's part even though it kind of appears that way

Look with me at **Joshua 23:12-13** where Joshua had warned the people of this very outcome, saying:

For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you.

God had warned Israel of the consequences of disobedience in these two areas and now his messenger announces those consequences will be enforced

God isn't breaking his covenant with Israel; he is enforcing its terms

And in verses 4-5 we see the people's response to the messenger's pronouncement [**Judges 2:4-5**]

As soon as the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD.

The people respond appropriately as they weep over their transgressions and memorialize their response by naming the place "Bochim," which means "place of weeping" and offer sacrifices to God

At this point, we have no reason to suspect that their repentance is anything but genuine

But we will be disappointed as the narrative continues because, as the account unfolds, we will see that this is the last time they respond in this way and we will soon see just how short-lived this spiritual revival was

Conclusion

I think you will agree that this is a depressing start to the book of Judges

So, what should we take from this account of a people, having been richly blessed by God, failing to live up to God's commands and suffering the consequences of compromising?

I think we must first recognize that God has not commanded us today to practice *herem* so as to wipe out the unbelievers around us as he did the nation of Israel

Our unbelieving neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family aren't the enemy - our war is a spiritual war and we are to fight against spiritual the forces that are arrayed against God

We also need to recognize that our nation isn't the same as the nation of Israel and we can't equate the United States of America or any other political entity with the nation of Israel during the time of the Judges

That means we need to recognize that what we see in Judges can't be applied to our nation and how far our nation may have strayed from God's ideal for a nation

The best application of the principles we see here is first to the individual follower of Jesus Christ and then, on a somewhat limited basis, to the church as a whole

After all, the church is made up of individuals and the church will move closer to God's ideal as individual Christ-followers move closer to God's ideal

And **Galatians 3:28** tells us that being in Christ makes one Abraham's offspring and heirs according to as promise so we see an apt correspondence of Christ-followers to biblical Israel

So, if the primary application of this passage is to the individual believer, we need to first recognize that we too are under a covenant relationship with God - albeit the better, new covenant of Jesus' blood

And we need to recognize that this new covenant also comes with stipulations that require complete obedience if we are to fully enjoy God's continued blessing

We need to individually confront the issue of what the passage says to us today regarding practicing *herem* on sin in our lives and our spiritual failings when it comes to our commitment and obedience to God and his commandments to us

While Israel's disobedience in chapter 1 was reasonably small, we see in God's response that there is no substitute for complete obedience

God doesn't measure obedience on a curve and even a minor disobedience can result in big consequences and we cannot modify his standard to match our preferences

The nature of the book of Judges means that we will be considering larger sections of text than we typically do

That means that we won't often be reading through any of the passages in their entirety during the worship service

So, each week, I will give you the section of the book that we will be looking at on the following Sunday in the hope that you will read through it during the week to familiarize yourself with it

Next week, we will be looking at 2:6-3:6 which is another, parallel introduction to the time of the Judges before we begin our study of the large, central section of the book that contains the accounts of the various judges

Let's pray

Deuteronomy 7:1-11 (page 151)

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today.”