

Descending into Chaos Judges 1:1-2:5

PHBF 01.20.19 Judges: Spiraling Down

Ever think to yourself, “Well, at least it can’t get any worse”? Never a good thought.

ILLUS: replacing drywall in ceiling of friend’s house with Dad & Aundrea. Loose fill insulation – carry out = tiring, dirty; drop bag out window = exploded; lower with cotton rope = broke and exploded; lower with thin nylon rope = burned groove into fingers, released, fell, exploded.

Just when you thought it couldn’t get any worse!

That might be a fitting subtitle for the book of Judges. God’s people find themselves in one disaster after another, led by one poor example after another. Just when you think it couldn’t get any worse, it does. And the nation slowly spirals down into chaos. It’s not the kind of book you’d read to feel warm and cozy. But it is a realistic picture of the brokenness of our world. In this book, we’ll find oppression, narcissism, prostitution, murder, gang rape, human trafficking, civil war. This is a wonderful book for clarifying what the Bible truly is – NOT a book of virtues, moral example stories, and self-help instructions. It’s the history of God’s dealings with His sinful world and how He works again and again to rescue His people out of the mess their sin brings them into.

Off to a Great Start!

v1 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?”

The opening phrase tells us we’re part of a continuing story: “after the death of Joshua.” Judges takes place in that period of about 2-300 years between Israel’s great pioneering leaders, Moses & Joshua, and her greatest kings, David & Solomon. Hundreds of years prior, God had promised Abraham His blessing would be upon Abraham’s family and He would give them the land of Canaan as their home. Two generations later, the whole family moved to Egypt where they had eventually become enslaved; but now God had delivered them, given them His law and brought them through the wilderness under Moses, and brought them across the Jordan River and conquered most of the land under Joshua.

But now, Joshua is dead, and the people face a crossroads: will they

fulfill the work Joshua gave them to do? The author is already hinting at one of his key themes. Moses was a great leader. After Moses was Joshua. But who will step up now that Joshua is gone? ***It’s a question we should ask ourselves, brothers.*** My hope is that this book will challenge some of you, particularly you young guys, to see the need, answer the call, and get yourself ready to be a leader.

One of the key things Moses and Joshua did was talk to God. The people follow this example (v1): “the people of Israel inquired of the LORD.” They ask God something and He answers. NOTE: Pay attention to the dialogue in this book! Dialogues drive the plot in Judges, and they draw attention to the main themes.

v2 The LORD said, “Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.”

The Lord replies: “I have given the land into his hand.” The outcome is already decided. God is in absolute control. He is the hero of this book.

v3 And 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.

Simeon’s territory was contained within Judah’s, like the hole of a donut. It would have been natural for these tribes to work together. The cooperation of these two tribes is significant, because it hints at one of the minor themes in this book—unity when God is present vs. disunity when the people abandon Him. It’s a sign of God’s presence and blessing when His people work together.

Judah says: “Come up with me... that we may fight the Canaanites!” There’s no hesitation here. These guys are ready to rumble! They’re off to a great start.

Before we get further into it, I want to point out the literary structure here. This text has three major sections, marked by the verb “go up” (v1):

- 1:2-21 Judah goes up (cf. v16 – the Kenites went up with Judah)
- 1:22-36 Joseph goes up (Ephraim, Manasseh, northern tribes)
- 2:1-5 the Angel of the Lord goes up

NOTE: These 3 sections bring up the 3 major themes: leadership, compromise, grace.

Judah Goes Up

Verse 4 gives us a brief statement of the battle & its outcome:

v4 *Then Judah went up and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they defeated 10,000 of them at Bezek.*

It's a decisive victory over 10,000 opponents. Verses 5-8 give a more detailed account of one of the vanquished kings:

vv5-6 *They found Adoni-bezek at Bezek and fought against him and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. ⁶ Adoni-bezek fled, but they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and his big toes.*

Notice the detail: Israel finds him, fights him, pursues him, catches him, and cuts off thumbs & toes. Pretty grim, but important details. In verse 7, Adoni-bezek speaks, and his speech sheds a perspective on the incident that we are meant to consider (Notice the dialogue!):

v7 *And 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.*

He admits he's a sadistic tyrant who is getting exactly what he deserves. Furthermore, he knows this is God's doing, and it is just.

This is probably the place to say a word about whether Israel had any right to seize the land of the indigenous Canaanites. On the surface, the wholesale destruction of entire cities and the annihilation of whole people groups appears barbaric—something akin to ethnic cleansing and a thing entirely opposed to the nature of the God who tells us to "love your neighbor." But consider:

- One, this command is unique. It is not the norm for the people of God today. In fact, it was not even the norm for the people of God in the Old Testament. It applied only to this period, these nations, and this region.
- Two, we must recognize God as the Creator, Ruler, and Judge of all the earth. He has the right to distribute territories according to His will. Furthermore, He holds all people accountable for their sins and judges them with justice and equity. Israel's action against the Canaanites is a foreshadowing of God's judgment against sin on the Final Day. It's a warning to us all that there will come a time when God finally says, "Enough!"
- Three, God patiently withheld His justice from the Canaanites for 400 years while Israel was in Egypt (cf. Gen 15:16). He gave them ample time to repent, offering mercy upon mercy. By the time Israel moved in, the Canaanites' sin had filled the land to overflowing. In

other words, the Canaanites were not innocent—and they knew it, as our own text demonstrates.

- Four, some Canaanites were spared and avoided the destruction. Some surrendered. Others placed their faith in Israel's God and became proselytes. These cases prove that ethnicity was not the basis for the cleansing; idolatry was. The nations evicted were removed because of their sin, not their skin.
- Five, God's goal for the removal of the Canaanites was to preserve the purity and obedience of Israel. Had the Canaanites remained, God knew Israel would follow their pagan practices. And in fact, God didn't treat Israel any different from the Canaanites. When His own people became corrupt, God removed them from the land, too, just like He did to the Canaanites. The point is, God wanted ALL idolatry and sinfulness removed from the land.

Summary: God's goal was ultimately positive, not negative. He wanted to establish His good kingdom, and to do that He had to eliminate the corruption within.

Verses 8-15 describe the rest of Judah's campaign—victories over Jerusalem (v8), the hill country & the Negeb (dry plains area south of Jerusalem, v9), the cities of Hebron and Debir (vv10-11). In verse 12 we see some more dialogue:

vv12-15 *And Caleb said, "He who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give him Achsah my daughter for a wife." ¹³ And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it. And he gave him Achsah his daughter for a wife. ¹⁴ 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?" ¹⁵ 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.*

The military action (vv10-11) is described with extreme brevity, but this conversation (vv12-15) is recorded in detail. That, combined with the fact that this story is taken almost verbatim from Joshua 15:13-19, demonstrate that there's something here the author wants us to notice.

Caleb offers his daughter as wife to whatever warrior can take the city. He's not being sexist; he wants for his daughter the same life he has chosen for himself: courage, faith, bold exploits for God! Othniel wins, and soon becomes the best of the 6 major judges (ch3). But notice who is featured in this dialogue: it's Achsah, the woman. As soon as she

appears personally, she ceases to be an object in the control of these two good men. Her father gave her the Negeb as her dowry, and she negotiates for water rights. It's a bold and wise move, and the author obviously holds her in high regard for it.

What's the point? This exchange foreshadows one of the sub-themes of Judges: **how a man treats women is one of the key measures of his leadership**. God cherishes women, and a man who loves God is a man who honors women. It operates at the national level as well: the fate of women in this book is tied to the spiritual condition of the whole nation. **How women are treated serves as a barometer for the spiritual condition of society**. And it's true not just for ancient Israel.

Verses 16-18 wrap up Judah's campaign. They maintain friendly terms with the Kenites, who have treated them well (v16). The alliance with Simeon is mentioned again, framing this whole section (v17). Victories over the Philistine cities in the southwest (v18). Verses 19-21 sum it up:

vv19-21 *And 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. ²⁰ And Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said. And he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. ²¹ But 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.*

Two remarks worth noting. Notice, first, the qualification of v19: "BUT he could not drive out" – the first unsettling admission that not everything went according to plan. Why this failure? Are iron chariots really the problem? Joshua promised victory over iron chariots (Jo 17:18). Israel defeats an opponent with iron chariots in ch4. Why is technology suddenly such a factor, if God is with Judah? No answer is given here; we're simple left to wonder about the paradox.

Notice as well the ominous contrast of vv20-21: Caleb conquered his city, but the people of Benjamin did not. In fact, they settled down and lived with their enemies—which soon becomes a very serious state of affairs indeed. It's the first sign of compromise, but it certainly won't be the last.

Joseph Goes Up

Verses 22-36 recount the affairs of the "house of Joseph" (cf. that phrase in vv22,23,35). These are the wars of the northern tribes, and they don't go nearly as well as the wars of Judah in the south.

vv22-26 *The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel, and the LORD was with them. ²³ And the house of Joseph scouted out Bethel. (Now the name of the city was formerly Luz.) ²⁴ And 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." ²⁵ And 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. ²⁶ And 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.*

Notice the parallels in v22 and v2. "The house of Joseph went up" = "Judah shall go up." "The Lord was with them" = "I have given the land into his hand." Both stories describe dialogue between Israel and a single Canaanite: Adoni-bezek (vv5-7) and this unnamed villager (v24). You expect this story to play out just like that one did (v4): "Judah went up and the Lord gave the Canaanites into their hand."

But it doesn't work that way at all. Instead of winning with the help of the Lord, the Lord disappears from the story and doesn't return until chapter 2. Instead, the focus of the narrator is on the human strategy and cunning used to win this battle. In the earlier story, the pagan king is at the mercy of Judah, completely under their control: pursued, taken, and judged. But in this story, the Israelites see a pagan man, bargain with him, depend on his help to take the city, and release him. He builds a new city, ominously named after the one he betrayed. Canaanite culture lives on, with Israelite approval.

Like the Judah section, the Joseph section begins with a victory. But **we're left wondering where God is and if this strategy of bargaining with the enemy will ultimately be successful**. We don't have to wonder for long...

vv27-36 *Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages, for the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land. ²⁸ When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely. ²⁹ And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them. ³⁰ Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the*

inhabitants of Nahalol, so the Canaanites lived among them, but became subject to forced labor. ³¹ *Asher did not drive out* the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon or of Ahlab or of Achzib or of Helbah or of Aphik or of Rehob, ³² so the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for *they did not drive them out*. ³³ *Naphtali did not drive out* the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, so they lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and of Beth-anath became subject to forced labor for them. ³⁴ *The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain.* ³⁵ *The Amorites persisted in dwelling in Mount Heres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalvim, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labor.* ³⁶ *And the border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela and upward.*

Three comments on this section:

- failure becomes widespread—“did not drive out” occurs 7x.
- failure becomes more pronounced – takes on worse forms:
 - vv27-30: Canaanites lived among the Israelites (v29,30)
 - vv31-33: Israelites lived among the Canaanites (v32,33)
 - v34: Amorites pressed Dan back, Israelites allowed to survive and live at a distance
 - v36 traces the borders, not of Israel’s territory, but of the Amorites, demonstrating that they are the nation who lays claim to this land.
- failure was completely unnecessary

That they could put the Canaanites to “forced labor” indicates Israel was in control and just decided to live with the problem. It’s not their lack of strength that kept them from obeying; it was their lack of trust in God’s strength. The Bethel story (vv22-26) anticipates the situation to come—these tribes are content just to work out an arrangement to cope with the situation. They said: “we can’t” (v19). God said: “You won’t” (v2).

Judah went up. Joseph went up. Now the angel of the Lord goes up, not to fight the Canaanites, but to confront the Israelites. It’s the first of three direct confrontations like this (cf. 6:7-10, 10:10-16).

The Angel of the LORD Goes Up

2:1 *Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim.*

Gilgal was the location of Israel’s first encampment in the Promised

Land (Joshua 4). It’s where they set up 12 stones as a memorial from the Jordan crossing. They celebrated their first Passover there. It was the center of operations for Joshua’s campaign (10:15, 14:6). But most significantly, it was the place where the “Commander of the Lord’s Army” appeared to Joshua (5:13-15) and reminded him this land is holy ground. In other words, Gilgal is a geographical reminder that the Promised Land was the new Garden of Eden. It was the dwelling place of God, opened to them to live in His presence. And because He is a holy God, His home must be holy as well. This entire land of Canaan and all the people in it would need to be cleansed of the uncleanness that had built up there for centuries. His speech reminds them of this:

2:1b-3 *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, ² and 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? 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."*

He reminds them of His redemption of them, His gracious gift of this land, & His faithfulness to His promises (v1). The root of their disobedience—and ours—was a failure to remember the goodness of God. Next (v2), He reiterates the terms of the covenant: no agreements with the inhabitants of the land, destroy their system of worship. Then He brings the accusation: “But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?” And finally, a new promise (v3): “NOW I say, I will not drive them out before you, they will be thorns and a snare.”

Applications

His words drive home the point of the text and leave us with two applications.

1. The call to examine ourselves

The vehemence of this criticism might seem a little surprising at first. After all, when Judges 1 ends, Israel is in control, to a large degree. They have won some huge battles. They are the majority culture. They control the economy. Most of the Canaanites work for them. Yes, they’ve begun to rely on their own ingenuity instead of the Lord.

They've made some compromises and haven't actually obeyed God to the letter of the law. But their plans seem to have worked out OK.

But that's not how God sees it at all. He knows time will reveal the foolishness of their compromise. And spiritually, He sees they are a disaster. Israel thought they could carry out God's plan, but get it done their own way. And only halfway, at that. But Israel's God is not like the gods of the Canaanites. Their gods could be mixed and matched at will. But Yahweh demands total obedience and exclusive loyalty.

It's still a problem for us, isn't it? We're still tempted to obey halfway, to admire the gods of the culture, to do God's work our own way:

- corporately: the God-given means for spreading His kingdom are the power of the Spirit, prayer, and the word; but we'd rather use management techniques, leadership training, and marketing appeals. God evaluates success by holiness, love, and spiritual power; the culture measures by size, show, and alignment with their values.
- personally: lifestyle choices (security & comfort vs. sacrifice & love), strategies for change (faith vs. own ideas), goals (wealth & fame vs. know God & make Him known)

Tolerate Baal's people, learn Baal's ideas. Embrace Baal's ideas, bow at Baal's altar. Being faithful in little areas doesn't look very glamorous in the immediate, but not much else matters in the kingdom of God.

The central teaching of this passage is that God wants—and deserves—authority over every area of our lives. Not just some. All. He wanted Israel to cleanse the entire land of Canaan, no idols remaining anywhere. Perfect and exclusive loyalty to Yahweh all throughout the land. Ultimately, either all of your life is given to God, or none is.

God demands exclusive and total loyalty, not because He's so selfish, but because He's so loving. He is jealous for all of your heart. His is the love of a husband for his wife, which is understandably provoked when any rival enters the picture. ...which is the second point of application.

2. An invitation to respond to God's grace
God's sovereignty and grace run through this book like a beam of light

cutting through a dark night. He warns to restore, not to crush. And the people respond well—their sorrow leads to acknowledgment of their sin and an appeal for forgiveness:

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. ⁵ And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD.

Did you notice who brings this message? "The angel of the Lord." Who is that? Clearly, He identifies Himself with God ("I delivered you, made a covenant with you, etc.). "The angel of the Lord" appears various times in the Old Testament (Gen 16 – Hagar, Gen 22 – Abraham sacrificing Isaac, occasionally in Judges, Psalms, and the prophets), but then he disappears from the pages of the Bible when we come to the NT. Significantly, he often appears in a context where the holy God wants to keep company with sinners. He is, in this sense, a merciful accommodation or condescension of God where, if He were to appear to sinners in all His glory and holiness, He would consume them. So He comes in the form of "the angel of the Lord." On the basis of these points, many conclude the angel of the Lord is a preincarnate appearance of Jesus.

And that would make sense in this passage. In fact, this passage demands the presence of Jesus. Did you notice the tension His own words create?

- "I said I will never break my covenant with you" (v1b).
- "I will not drive the people out and give you the land." (v3)

In other words, He says "I swore I would give you this land, but I swear I will not give it to a disobedient people." The people have put Him in an impossible situation. He promised to bless them as His covenant people, but He cannot bless them if they are disobedient. How can the tension be resolved?

Only on the cross can we see how God resolves the tension between His demand for obedience and His desire to bless. The cross was justice and grace both displayed at once. Justice for the disobedience of His people, poured out in punishment upon Jesus. Grace and blessing for the perfect obedience of Jesus, offered freely to those who repent and receive Him by faith. The cross makes us hate our compromise because it shows this is how much God hates sin; and it makes us rest in His grace because it shows this is how much God loves me.