

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

Prelude To Apostasy¹

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Judges 1:1-2:5

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Judges 1. (Passage to be read in service)

Thank you, Shondra, for reading our text for this morning. I have a suspicion that it will be harder to find volunteer readers over the course of our Judges series. This is a *hard* book. This is a *violent* book. This is a book that *reeks* of the *reality of what sinful people are capable of*. As one commentator rightly observes:

It is so earthy, so puzzling, so primitive, so violent - in a word, so strange, that the church can scarcely stomach it.²

Our weekly e-blast will announce the passage for each coming Sunday and – in all seriousness – you should read the text ahead of time if you plan to have children sitting with you in the service. I won't be flippant or crass with any of these topics, but neither will I be skipping anything in the text. Here's why: You can try as hard as you like to pretend that these stories aren't in the Bible, but the reality is that *they are!* Your kid is going to read this one day! The unbeliever that you're trying to evangelize to is going to ask about this one day! They're going to ask you, 'Why is this in the Bible?' And, on that day, the tactic of covering your eyes and flipping to the next page simply won't cut it. You're going to want to have an answer.

¹ I'm pulling this expression from the ESV Study Bible outline introduction to Judges.

² Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such A Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2000), 9.

Now, having said all of that, I want to state very clearly that – while this IS a difficult book – it is a GOOD book! If we can stop squirming long enough to listen, then we will find in these chapters timeless warnings and hope-filled anticipations! We will see honest reflections of ourselves and wonderful glimpses of God’s mercy!

So, before we jump into this passage in particular, I want to begin with a big-picture observation of the role that this book plays in the story of redemption. In the flow of the Old Testament, the book of Judges can be summarized in one simple statement:

Monarchy is better than anarchy.

We see that in the closing words:

In those days **there was no king in Israel**. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
(Judges 21:25 ESV)

We’re not sure who wrote this book – though later Jewish tradition believes that it was Samuel – but we know *why* they wrote it. At its core, Judges is making one point. With each depressing chapter, the author is seeking to convince his audience that Israel desperately NEEDS A KING!

Israel needed to see that. And we need to see it too.

Sin would transform us all into anarchists. Our sinful lean is always *away* from obedience and submission, and – if we choose to indulge that rebellion – our lives will begin to look like the chaos that we find described in these gruesome pages. ‘Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.’ Isn’t that an apt description of North America today? Didn’t Frank Sinatra write something of an anthem for us when he bellowed ‘I did it MY way’?

Israel needed to see that *their* way was the way to chaos and ruin. They needed to see that true peace – lasting peace – was only possible when they surrendered their anarchy and came under the rule of a righteous king. That’s the BIG PICTURE. But let’s focus in now on our passage for this morning. In verse 1 we read:

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?” (Judges 1:1 ESV)

These opening words set the scene for us. Moses led God’s people out of their slavery in Egypt and right to the border of the promised land. Joshua – Moses’ successor – then led them *into* the promised land and began to push out the inhabiting nations.

But now both Moses and Joshua are gone. The leaders have died. And yet, the promised land has not fully come under Israel’s control. They have not completed the assignment that God gave to them back in Deuteronomy 20. There, we read:

But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, ¹⁷ but **you shall devote them to complete destruction**, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, (Deuteronomy 20:16-17 ESV)

Our passage for this morning is *long*, but it is *simple*. This is a story about Israel’s failure to follow through with God’s command. He told them to devote the inhabiting nations to destruction, but they didn’t. This story presents us with one obvious question, and one obvious warning.

One Obvious Question

Let’s begin with the obvious question:

Why would a good God command a genocide?

If you ever want to be able to have a real conversation with a skeptic, then this is a question that you need to be prepared to answer. In Deuteronomy 20, God is calling for the annihilation of the former occupants of the promised land. He’s commanding Israel to *erase* these nations entirely.

Now, if we go on reading, God gives His *reason* for this command in the very next verse:

you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, **that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable**

practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 20:17-18 ESV)

We learn here that the reason why God called for the complete and utter destruction of these nations is because God did not want His people to adopt any of their abominable practices.

Let's pause here because this itself is a lesson that's worth the price of admission: Sin is CONTAGEOUS. This is why God's word teaches us:

Do not be deceived: "**Bad company ruins good morals.**" (1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV)

And again:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14 ESV)

Show me the company you keep, and I'll have a very good idea of how you will be living your life in five years. Show me who you're *dating* and we can remove all doubt. Sin is contagious!

And the sin that was being practiced in the promised land was the kind of sin that would lead to the ruin of Israel. The Canaanites worshipped Ba'al and Asherah. They believed that the harvest came each year as the result – the offspring – of these fertility gods. Therefore, in order to *remind* these fertility gods to copulate, the Canaanites engaged with prostitutes at the shrines. THAT was what worship looked like for them. Not only were they depraved sexually, but we read in Deuteronomy 18:

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. ¹⁰ 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 ¹¹ or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, ¹² 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.** (Deuteronomy 18:9-12 ESV)

Why did God’s judgement fall on these nations? They were calling prostitution worship, they were practicing witchcraft, they were summoning the dead, and they were literally *burning their children alive!* They had completely given themselves over to sin.

Not only that, we learn in the book of Genesis that the sin of these nations had been going on for GENERATIONS! This conquest was not simply a snap judgement of God – like a parent losing their temper after a long day at work. More than 500 YEARS before this judgement, God pointed forward to this day and He said to Abraham:

“Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, **for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.**” (Genesis 15:13b-16 ESV)

The nations in our passage for this morning are the descendants of ‘the Amorites’ in Genesis 15. Meaning – God watched and waited for over 500 YEARS before finally pouring out His judgement. They had been given ample opportunity to repent but – 500 years into their sin – their iniquity was complete. The window for mercy was closed and God’s wrath blazed forth.

Sometimes as Christians we treat these Old Testament stories as if they are embarrassing remnants of an angry Old Testament God that doesn’t exist anymore. We speak as if God has *changed* and we remove any sense of urgency that used to accompany these sobering passages.

We need to stop doing that.

God hasn’t changed. He was patient then, and He is patient now. His patience finally gave way to judgement then, and so too will it give way to judgement now. In 2 Peter 3, we’re told:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, **but is patient toward you**, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ¹⁰ **But the day of the Lord will come like a thief**, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Peter 3:9-10 ESV)

God is patient with sinners today. But the day of the Lord – the day of judgement – will come like a thief, and on that day God’s wrath will be poured out against all sin. It’s important that you know that.

The God of the Bible is a God who unapologetically pours out His holy wrath against our sin. Until you see that, you will never understand grace. You will never understand why it is such good news that Jesus bore the wrath that WE deserve on that cross!

God is holy, and sin is contagious. If you learn those two lessons, then you are well on your way to understanding the book of Judges. Having said all of that, we can now turn our attention to the one obvious warning in this passage.

One Obvious Warning

As we make our way through this first chapter, the warning becomes clear. I want to walk you through this account so that you can see it for yourself.

Chapter one begins with an account of Israel’s initial obedience. In spite of Joshua’s death, things started off well. In the first 18 verses, we read about the tribe of Judah and their thorough obedience. The sinful nations are routed before them and everything seems to be going according to plan until, in verse 19, we find the first sign of trouble:

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. (Judges 1:19 ESV)

Now, you might be tempted to think here, ‘Well, that doesn’t sound like *Judah’s* fault! Their opponents had chariots of IRON!’ But Judah had just been led out of Egypt – the most powerful nation on the planet at the time. Their parents had watched the Red Sea crash down over pharaoh’s army. They should have known that God is not thwarted by chariots. They would have taken the plain had they not given up.

But they did give up. The obedience that began well fell apart when it was faced with opposition.

Judah's failure was then repeated by the house of Joseph. They made a deal with one of the inhabitants of Luz. As a result, they destroyed the city, but they set the man free. God had commanded Israel to 'devote them to complete destruction', but the house of Joseph decided that they knew better. We read about the result of this seemingly small compromise in verse 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. (Judges 1:26 ESV)

The city that had been destroyed simply popped back up in another area – like a weed that was not pulled out by the root! At the first reading this doesn't seem like a noteworthy detail. But it is indicative of the problem that will lead to the demise of Israel! As one commentator notes:

the spirit of compromise is already there, like a worm in the ripe fruit... the city is taken, but the Canaanite informer survives to build another Luz because the Israelites deal *kindly*, or 'loyally', with him.³

From there, the pattern spirals downward as the author draws our attention to failure in every tribe.

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.** (Judges 1:27 ESV)

And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, **so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them.** (Judges 1:29 ESV)

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. (Judges 1:30 ESV)

You get the idea.

This failure to follow through – this half-hearted obedience – led to the rebuke that we find in verses 1-5 of chapter 2. This is really God's summary of chapter 1. Look there again with me:

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

³ Michael Wilcock, *The Message Of Judges* (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 14.

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.” ⁴ 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. (Judges 2:1-5 ESV)

The angel of the Lord – a divine messenger who spoke the very words of God⁴ – went up from Gilgal to confront Israel. The author of this book expects us to remember the significance of Gilgal. We read about it in Joshua 5 where we learn that Gilgal was the city in the promised land where Israel made a covenant and recommitted themselves to God. As Tim Keller notes:

This was the place where God had forgiven their sin, bound them to himself as his people, and entered into relationship with them by grace, motivated only by his own loving kindness.⁵

God’s messenger came up from the place where Israel had promised to obey, and he called them to account for their disobedience. They promised that they would break down the altars. They promised that they would make no covenant with the people of the land.

They promised.

But they did not keep their promise.

The result – God declares – is that the nations that were spared will go on to be thorns in the side of the Israelites. The idols that were not removed will be snares that will capture the next generations. In short, the entire tragedy of the book of Judges flows downstream from this compromise. Which leads us to the one obvious warning in this passage:

Sin that is ignored today will lead to anguish and apostasy tomorrow

⁴ I’ll speak further about the discussion surrounding ‘the angel of the Lord’ in future weeks. Time doesn’t permit me to address it today.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Judges For You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 22-23.

That's it. That is what this passage is all about. God sends a message to His people and says in no uncertain terms: 'You were half-hearted in your obedience and, as a result, you have planted thorn bushes and set dangerous traps in front of your own children.'

When the Israelites hear this pronouncement, they made quite a display. We read in verses 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.** ⁵And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the Lord. (Judges 2:4-5 ESV)

They wept! They wept so much, that they decided to name the place 'Bochim' which means 'Weepers'! So many tears! And they made sacrifices! It was quite the religious show!

But, do you know what they didn't do? They didn't OBEY. As Samuel would later teach Israel's first king, Saul:

Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams. (1 Samuel 15:22 ESV)

So many sacrifices; so little change. Tears don't topple idols. Real repentance is more than simply *feeling bad*. Real repentance means a decided *turning away* from sin.

Over the course of this series, we will hear about the anguish and the apostasy of the following generations, but before we look at THAT, the author of Judges means for us to see THIS. It all started here. The sin that the father ignores is more often than not the sin that grows up and chokes out the faith of the children.

As we come to a close, I want to spend some time sitting under the weight of this warning. That's one of the responses we're meant to have as we read the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul writes:

Now these things happened to them as an example, **but they were written down for our instruction**, on whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Corinthians 10:11 ESV)

So, let me ask you a very simple question: Is there sin in your home that you are ignoring?

‘So what if I have too much to drink on special occasions?’

‘So what if I raise my voice at my family when I want to get my own way?’

‘So what if I harbour grudges?’

‘So what if I’m a gossip?’

‘So what if I’m lazy and dishonest at work?’

‘So what if I binge watch inappropriate shows?’

‘I’m a good person, you know? I’ve given up so many of my old sinful practices for Jesus... If I want to hang on to this *one thing* – if I don’t feel like knocking down this *one idol* – is that *really* such a big deal?’

Matthew Henry warns:

those that connive at sin know not what dangerous snares they lay for those that come after them.⁶

God does not call you away from your sin because He wants to rob you of joy. God calls you away from your sin because you have no idea just how dangerous and destructive sin truly is! We’re like children who are angry because our parents won’t let us play on the freeway!

Judah neglected to drive out the Canaanites who lived in the lower plains. If you attended the parenting summit a few months ago, then you might just remember that it was in the plains of Judah where one of the Kings of Judah committed an unspeakable evil:

He even burned his son as an offering, **according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.** (2 Kings 16:3b ESV)

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 432.

How much evil could have been prevented if that first generation would have simply finished what they started! John Owen famously said, ‘Be ever killing sin, or it will be ever killing you.’

The Christian life is a life of Spirit-empowered, slow-and-steady progress. You can move forward, or you can move backward, but there is no standing still. In the same way that Judah had no excuse to fear the chariots because the God of angel armies was on their side, neither do we have any excuse to surrender to the besetting sin in our lives. God will give us victory!

We will not be perfect in this life, but that is no excuse not to offer up to God our very best.

Where are you apathetic? What is the sin that you have made peace with? What have you allowed to take root in your home?

By the grace of God, in the power of Christ, with the help of the Spirit, NAME that sin, REPENT of that sin, and give yourself no rest until you have DRIVEN IT OUT once and for all! As we often sing:

Let no vice or sin remain that resists your holy war!⁷

Our war today is not against flesh and blood. It is a war against sin. It’s a war against the tempter who wants to rob us of all that God has for us. We fight this war by turning aside from every weight and sin that would hold us back.

Sin that is ignored today will lead to anguish and apostasy tomorrow. That is the story of Judges.

But that need not be your story. You have the resources of heaven at your disposal. Jesus himself fights on your behalf! Uproot the thorns that have been planted in your house! Remove the snares that have been set before your child’s bedroom! Name it. Repent of it. And drive it out. For the glory of God, and the spiritual lives of our children. To that end, let’s pray together.

⁷ Matt Boswell, *O Great God*.