

The Weird and Wonderful World of Judges

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[0 : 00] Let me just pray for us. Lord, open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from your word. Soften our hearts that they might receive that word.

Transform our wills that we might be doers of it. Loose our tongues that we might proclaim it. And we ask this for the glory of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Well, friends, I've been storing up this series of sermons, Bible talks on judges for a long, long time.

You see, I have always thought that I should not even attempt it until I was more developed as a reader of the Bible and even as a preacher. You see, I must admit that even though I have given overview lectures at Theological College on judges, I don't know that I've ever really fully understood it.

Nor have I really understood how it integrates with Christian faith. I have always, though, wanted to preach from it. Because I know if I preach from it, I've got to understand it in order to communicate it to other people.

[1 : 07] So along with preaching from the book of Revelation, I've always had a goal to do it. I've never had the courage. But earlier this year, I made a decision that I was ready.

And what's more, I told a publisher I'd write a book on it, which meant I had to be committed. So here we go. Now, finally, I'm going to have to try and make sense of this book.

And you are my guinea pigs. So you may well ask what it is that I'm scared of. Well, let me tell you. First, unlike books like Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, and a number of Old Testament books, Judges is not mentioned much in the New Testament.

And when it is mentioned, the people in it are mentioned quite positively. Let me give you an example. Let me read to you from the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. As you know, Hebrews chapter 11 lists, say, a great, all the great ones or many of the great ones of the Old Testament.

And toward the end of that chapter, the writer of Hebrews says this. And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephtar about David and Samuel and the prophets who, through faith, conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned into strength, and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

[2 : 34] Now, the problem is, whenever I have read Judges, I must confess that I can't quite see it myself. David? Definitely.

Samuel? Of course. But Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephtar, well, to tell the truth, some of them look a bit like scoundrels in the book of Judges, if not layabouts.

I often find that they do, and others in the book of Judges, do things that I think look a little dubious to me. And so I've wondered if I'm really not reading Judges correctly, which is why I think I've got to preach on it.

And that's one reason I've struggled with it. I've struggled with it because I've not quite, I'm being very frank with you, I've not quite been able to see the heroes of Judges as the New Testament writers see them, which means I'm not reading them properly, I think.

I've got to learn to read Judges better. But that's not the only reason I've struggled with Judges. You see, Judges is crammed full of awful and gruesome bits.

[3 : 39] It has atrocities that are not dissimilar to some of those that we have seen and despised in the last century in our world.

It has acts that are not unlike those that we've heard or seen about on our television screens in the last 10 years in the Middle East. And we have heard of one of them in our reading today.

I heard sighs or groans or surely you're not reading that in church sort of sounds as we read through chapter one. Of chopping off thumbs and big toes.

There are stories of women putting tent pegs through the temples of people who've come to them for refuge. Or of apparent heroes who dedicate their daughters to sacrifice.

There are gang rapes, mutilations, burnings of people alive, whippings with thorns and briars, impalings, dismemberments. Very rough justice.

[4 : 45] Not all perpetrated by the people of God, let me tell you. But they are. They're there. There are wars amongst the tribes of Israel. If you count up the deaths in the book, it makes the war in Iraq look somewhat tame.

One scholar I read cited that there were 150,000 deaths in the book of Judges. Now you've got to remember, it was a very small country then, very small population relatively speaking to what it would be like today.

So it's a book that for that reason I find worrying. It's a book that I also, I must say, find I love to read. It's wonderful and weird. It's got all sorts of incredible things in it.

For all his faults, Samson is something of a winsome man, isn't he? Then there's Ehud, the left-handed hero who sneaks a short sword into the court of a fat king and stabs him so that the fat oozes over to engulf the whole hilt of the knife and so on.

And you are meant to laugh at it and yet it's a gruesome act, isn't it? Or there's the prophetess Deborah who has to cajole the men of her day to stand up and be men, one particular man.

[6 : 04] And altogether I find the book of Judges intriguing and troubling. It's weird, my way of summarising it is it's weird, wonderful and worrying. So welcome to that weird, worrying world of Judges, that wonderful, weird, worrying world of Judges.

We are, I think, in for a treat. You see, my experience is that when I sit down to seriously study a book and I grapple with it, I begin to understand it.

I begin to see what God is saying through it. When I commit to preach on it, then I've got to help it, I've got to make sense to others, it makes sense to others. And so as I said, you are my guinea pigs. You'll probably all get a mention in the preface of the book sometime, not by name I should say, but just as a group of you.

We will spread out the preaching on this particular book over two sections. And those two sections will take us in two sections of two years. And I'm hoping that through studying it, we will, through covering the whole book, God will make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Because that's what it's designed to do. And I'm also hoping and praying that through this God-breathed scripture, which the book of Judges is, God will teach, rebuke, correct, and train us in righteousness and equip us for every good work in serving him.

[7 : 27] Because that's what it was designed to do. So let's get started. Turn with me in your Bibles to Judges chapter 1. Now what I'm going to do today is I'm going to give you a brief survey of the first chapter and then the first five verses of chapter 2.

So let's get started with chapter 1. And Judges 1 verse 1 sets the context. It is a period, we're told, after the death of Joshua. In other words, this is a period after Israel has come out of Egypt.

The hero Moses has died. His successor Joshua has brought the people of God into the land of promise, where they were told that they must clear the land of its occupants and of their gods.

So, but Joshua now is dead as well. And the task is incomplete. So we have the people in the land, but Israel does not have any kings yet.

And there is no clear leader of the tribes of Israel. In fact, they are a rather disparate group of people, tribes all over the place, still trying to occupy the land.

[8 : 31] The Canaanites are still present in the land and still need to be cleared out as God told the people to do. But there is no clear leader, no king. That's the context of verse 1.

And it's into that context that the Israelites pose a question. They indicate that they still want to press on by saying these words to God. In verse 1, they ask, who of us is to go up first to fight against the Canaanites?

And in verse 2, the Lord answers back and says, Judah shall go up. I've given the land into their hands. So there is the context. Joshua is dead. Israel wants to press on and occupy the land and do what God wants in it.

And God instructs them to do it under the leadership of Judah. So in verses 1 to 21, we hear of the exploits of the tribes of Judah. And it's broken into two sections.

And let me show you. Look at verse 1. Israel asks, who shall go up? Now look at verse 2. The Lord says, Judah shall go up. Verse 3.

[9 : 32] Israel conscripts Simeon, another tribe, and urges them to come up. And in verses 3 to 8, we have a concentration on this going up. Then verse 9 concentrates on going down, which I think means going down in terms of, you know, the Palestinian geography.

So there are two campaigns. In one, Israel's going up. And in the other, Israel's going down. Now look briefly at the first campaign. There's a pattern. The tribe of Judah is joined by the Simeonites in verse 3.

There's a brief mention of the outcome in verse 4. That is, Israel is victorious. And then there's mention of a large number of casualties among those who were defeated by Israel. That's verse 4. And then there is an account of the death of an important leader, Adonai Bezek. And that's in 5 to 7. And then finally in verse 8, it is mentioned that the men of Judah took Jerusalem.

And on the whole, the passage indicates that God's promise in verse 2 is fulfilled, isn't it? You see, the Lord has given the land into their hands. They are successful.

[10 : 37] By the way, I should just mention in passing that although there is brutality in relation to Adonai Bezek, he himself acknowledges it's justified.

Did you notice that? Right. So in verse 7, 70 kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off. I have picked up scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them. So he acknowledges it's rough justice, but it's justice.

Now let's move on to the next section, which is verses 9 to 21. And we're told that Judah goes down this time. Three significant incidents are reported. In verses 9 to 10, we're told of the victory over Hebron, a very significant city for them.

Verse 11, we're told of the victory of Debir. And that gives rise to the story about a daughter of Caleb who marries Othniel. Now Othniel, we'll find out later, is going to be a judge over Israel.

So he himself will be a judge. Anyway, one of the daughters, a daughter of Caleb marries Othniel. However, at the moment, you see, the focus is not on Othniel, but on Aksar, the daughter of Caleb, and her boldness and initiative.

[11 : 43] You see, just as a later judge, Barak, is outshone by a woman prophet, so here, I think, Deborah outshines Othniel, a later judge.

And she is, I think, the hero of this little snippet. She appears to be presented as a model woman. She is the opposite of Delilah. Remember Delilah, the wife of another judge, Samson?

Delilah undermines her husband, causes him nothing but harm. And that's not what Aksar does.

She does the opposite. Anyway, verse 16, we're told of the fulfillment of a promise that Moses gave to his father-in-law, that is, to the Kenites.

And they have blessing in the land. Verse 17, an alliance exists between Judah and Simeon.

There's further success. Then in verse 19, there's a summary of the whole first half of the chapter.

We're told that the Lord was with the men of Judah. However, although the Lord is with them, did you notice something right at the end there? Can you see it? They are not totally successful. Even though God had promised in Joshua 17, 18, that they would have victory despite the chariots, they are unable to drive out the people of the plains because they have chariots.

[13 : 01] It makes you wonder, why is this? Why are they not successful when God had said they would be? Perhaps they're not dependent upon God. Perhaps they're not as assertive as Aksar was in claiming their inheritance in the land.

Then in verse 21, a further note of hesitancy is sounded. The Benjaminites also did not drive out the Jebusites. Can you see what's being said? That despite success, the tribes in the south continue to live with Canaanites in their midst.

Now, let's move on to the second half of the chapter. And again, briefly, I'll tell you what's going on. Look at verses 22 to 36. And let me give you the overthrust of them by looking particularly at verse 22.

We shift from Judah to the southern tribes, that is the southern tribes, to the tribes of Joseph that are in the north. The Lord is with them, we're told, just as we heard that he was with the tribe of Judah.

And then the story goes on. And there are clear echoes of great victory that Israel had when they first entered. Do you remember what happened when Israel first entered the promised land? [14:08] Do you remember the very first encounter that they had? Do you remember Jericho? Do you remember how they conquered Jericho? Do you remember how they got there? They sent spies out beforehand. And they came across an informer, Rahab, who spared them.

They promised Rahab safety. They then conquered the city and then Rahab's integrated into Israel. Do you remember that story? There's an echo of it here, isn't there? Because the spies are sent. They come across an informer who spares them. They promised him safety. They then conquered the city and spare the man. However, I want you to notice something very different about the end of this story.

You see, Rahab in Jericho became an Israelite. But here, the man who spared here, what does he do? Have a look. He builds a new city.

And it's a Canaanite city. Right? It's not an Israelite city. The result is very different from the result that happened earlier.

[15:12] And this result also is very different from what happened just to half a chapter earlier on with Judah. They allowed no negotiation with Adonai Bezek. And they had no leftover Canaanite influence.

And as we go on through the rest of the chapter, let me tell you, things don't get any better. Conquests are incomplete. Tribe after tribe is said to not. You systematically go through the tribes and you say, they didn't drive out the people.

Everywhere there are pockets of remaining Canaanites. Oh, they might be having a tough time, but they're still there. The author says a number of times that the Canaanites lived among them.

Verse 27, verses 29 to 30, verses 32 to 33, verse 35. You see, Israel does not do what they had been commanded in places like Deuteronomy 7, verse 1.

And Joshua 23, 1 to 14. They do not rid the land of its occupants. They do not clear the land. Let's see if we can sum up what we found here in Judges 1.

[16:18] First, it is like an annul, isn't it? It's just a story. It looks like a summary of what actually happened. And it is. Second, it is geographical. And it attempts to cover the whole of the land.

Most of the times given to Judah in the south. But then we do move into the north to Joseph and a little reflection on Benjamin and then Manasseh, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali.

In other words, the author is trying to give us a snapshot of the nation as a whole. And we can see that in verse 1, which talks about all Israel. Third thing is, the first half looks like a success story, doesn't it?

Judah, the Simeonites. However, even in the first half of the chapter, there are remaining Canaanite influences. And then in the second half, they become profound.

So what does that mean we have here in Judges 1? We have ominous notes of failure. Ominous notes of a failure to fulfill the brief given by God in Deuteronomy.

[17:24] Failure to oust the occupants of the land. Failure to engage in the sort of warfare that God demanded. Indications, therefore, that Israel is dipping into spiritual and eventually moral degradation.

This chapter indicates that while the book of Joshua may have looked really positive, the reality is somewhat different. What looks positive will go the way of the chapter as a whole.

What has happened through the chapter? Things have got worse and worse and worse and worse. It might start positively, but it's going to end negatively. It will end badly. And if you read on in the book of Judges, that's exactly what happens.

Now let's briefly turn to Judges 2, 1 to 5. We're going to come back to this passage next week because if I can picture it, it's like this. Judges 2, 1 to 5 is the thing that binds the two chapters together.

And there's some overlap between the two of them. It finishes chapter 1 and it starts chapter 2 and it puts this hinge between them. It wraps up chapter 1, introduces an axis, sets the scene for chapter 2.

[18:33] Let's see what it says. It is the first of three confrontations between the Lord and Israel. There'll be another one in chapter 6 and another one in chapter 10. Now look at verse 3.

In other words, you see, unlike Israel who disobeys God's word, God will act according to the word he gave Israel right at the beginning of the covenant back in Exodus 23.

He will fulfill what he said. He said, if you don't do this, this is what will happen. And he's going to do it. Now friends, this is a very sad place to begin our exploration of Judges, isn't it?

It's very sad. We began with success and light and we end with failure and darkness. Have let me let you into a little secret.

The secret arises from the reminders of Exodus that I've just told you about and the covenant. You see, when you read Exodus, you find exactly what you find here.

[20 : 13] You find Israel failing. Do you remember? God brings them out of Egypt. He brings them to the bottom of Mount Sinai. There he sends Moses up to get the Ten Commandments. And Israel stays down at the bottom of the mountain.

And do you remember what they're doing? They're breaking the first two commandments while God's giving the first two commandments up the top. They're making a golden calf and worshipping it. Or worshipping its image.

And God does punish them. He does judge them. But do you know what? He spectacularly continues to go with them.

Exodus shows us that if God's people are to have a future, then their only chance of success is not with themselves, but with a God of grace.

See, Israel's future cannot lie in their own ability. It can only lie with God. And let me tell you, friends, the same is true with us.

[21 : 14] We too are unable to keep God's word. Though we're new covenant people who have new hearts and the Holy Spirit. But we too are unable to live consistently in godliness before our Father.

And before our Lord. Because of human inability. Because of Israel's inability. You see, because of our inability and Israel's inability, God sent his son to both atone for our sin.

And to live the life that we have failed to live. He, the perfect human being, died in our place. God's grace, friends, is the sole ground for human beings to be able to live before God.

Friends, let me be clear about Israel. This passage is crystal clear. Israel was in covenant with God. They had an obligation to live by his word. It is an obligation that they openly and freely signed up for.

In the promised land, it had definite shape for them. They were to live according to God's word in particular areas. And one area of particular relevance was their relationship with the occupants of the land.

[22 : 22] God was very clear about this from Exodus 23 on. They were to trust that God would give them the land. They were to engage in war and rid the land of the inhabitants who would inevitably lead them away from the true God.

They were to trust God. They were to trust God to give them success in this. But they did not live in that trust. They did not live in obedience. They did not trust God.

They did not trust God. They did not trust God's word. And God had made it clear there was to be no compromise. Only with him did their future lie.

They had tied themselves to him. They would live rightly before him. They were not to compromise in their devotion to God. They were not to compromise in their obedience to him.

At the heart of it, that's what this warfare was about. It was ridding the land of the people and the things that would compromise and threaten their allegiance to God. Friends, as I pondered this passage today, I began to think of what might be the equivalent for us of what Israel was called upon to do.

[23 : 33] And it struck me in the New Testament there is an equivalent. It's mentioned twice in Matthew's Gospel. You see, friends, do you remember these words? If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away from you.

For it is better to enter heaven with one hand than to have two hands and to be cast into the fire of hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away.

For it is better for you to enter heaven with two eyes, sorry, with one eye than to be cast into the hell of fire with two. Can you hear what God is saying, what the Lord Jesus himself is saying?

He's saying, you are my special people. Sin taints you. Sin can lock you out of my presence. Sin can cause you to not be with me.

Be rigorous with it. Now, he didn't mean physically cut off your hand. He didn't mean physically pluck out your eye. But he meant, rid yourselves of the things that will stop you relating to me

properly and it will taint relationship with me.

[25 : 00] Friends, it's a bit like that. That's what Israel was to do in the land. It was serious stuff and it is serious stuff that we're invited to do.

Friends, rid yourself of the sins that will keep you from relationship with God and taint your relationship with God. And you all know what they are.

I know what they are in relation to me. Sin can harm us, friends. It can do damage to the thing that is most important for us.

Rid yourself from it. And it will only be possible with God. It will only be possible with God. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for this rather sobering story of your ancient people struggling to be yours.

[26 : 12] Father, we pray that you would help us. Thank you, Father, that we have things that they didn't have. We have an assurance of sins forgiven in the Lord Jesus. We have cleansed hearts.

We have new hearts. We have been given your spirit. So, Father, we have assistance that they did not have.

And please help us, Father, to do away with the things that would drag us from you. Please help us to be rigorous in this. Please forgive us for our simple acceptance of things that, well, we've come to like.

Father, please help us to put aside the things that you don't like. And, Father, you know what they are and we too know what they are. Please help us in this, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.