

Judges: Israel's Compromise, I

Having looked at the book of Joshua, we will now look at the book of Judges. I make no apology in rushing from one to the other, because I think it is healthy to look at the two of them together. They give us both sides of the coin. Joshua dealt with God's conquest of Canaan. And it really was God's conquest. Judges deals with Israel's compromise with what God had won for them.

The book of Joshua began after the death of Moses, while the book of Judges takes up the story after the death of Joshua. If you read carefully, the death of Joshua is recorded twice. This alerts us to the fact that biblical narratives can be quite sophisticated, presenting a dischronologized narrative. At the beginning of the book of Judges, you have two introductions to the book that introduce us to the dynamics of the book from two different angles.

Judges begins with the death of Joshua, and it portrays the period between the conquest of the land, which is the initial subjugation of the land and the inception of monarchy in Israel, the beginning of kingship in Israel. It would be fair to say that the period of the judges extends into 1 Samuel, and it is Samuel's speech in 1 Samuel 12 that marks the end of the period of the judges. Samuel himself is regarded as the last judge. You can see in 1 Samuel 12:8 that Samuel is quite aware of the periods of Israel's history up to that point. He identifies the exodus and the conquest, saying, "After Jacob entered Egypt, they cried to the Lord for help, and the Lord sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your forefathers out of Egypt and settled them in this place." Then in 1 Samuel 12:9-1 Samuel describes the period of the judges. He says,

But they forgot the Lord their God; so he sold them into the hand of Sisera, the commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hands of the Philistines and the king of Moab, who fought against them. They cried out to the Lord and said, "We have sinned; we have forsaken the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths. But now deliver us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve you." Then the Lord sent Jerub-Baal, Barak, Jephthah and Samuel, and he delivered you from the hands of your enemies on every side, so that you lived securely. But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, "No, we want a king to rule over us"—even though the Lord your God was your king. Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the LORD has set a king over you.

So we see Samuel clearly rehearsing Israel's history, beginning with the exodus, moving to the conquest and then the period of the judges, and now the institution of the monarchy.

The tone of the book of Judges, or the feeling that it generates in people, may be described as a sinking, cyclical, chaotic feeling. You get the idea this is a disturbed period of time. People seemed doomed to repeat the same mistakes. It seems to be a dark, depressing time, particularly as things at the end of the book do not seem to get better but worse. You get the idea that the conquest of the land is very limited. It is much more limited than a superficial reading of the book of Joshua might lead you to expect. One commentator on the book of Judges remarked that "a careful reading of Joshua would give the impression that the Israelites had devoted every city and destroyed every pagan altar. The story of the conquest stresses that side." I disagree with that statement. I would say that a superficial, careless, quick reading of Joshua might lead one to those conclusions. A careful reading, however, enables you to realize that there is still much left to be done. There are some limitations to what the people have done with regard to the subjugation. While the occupation is total, which is what is emphasized in the book of Joshua, the people still have work to do.

A distinction is made between what God does—His giving of the land and not allowing anyone to stand against Israel—and what the people are to do. As they gain the upper hand, they are to go in and make use of that and occupy and possess the territories they have been given. Notice Joshua's words of farewell in Joshua 23:

After a long time had passed and the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then old and well advanced in years, summoned all Israel—their elders, leaders, judges and officials—and said to them: “I am old and well advanced in years. You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you. Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain—the nations I conquered—between the Jordan and the Great Sea in the west. The Lord your God himself will drive them out of your way. He will push them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you.”

In other words, God is not inactive. It is not that God did His part, gave Israel the upper hand, and now has backed off. God will continue to drive the people out from before Israel. But the people are now enjoined to trust Him, to go in, and to occupy the territories. They were called upon to be strong and very courageous. They were called to trust Him in the conquest itself and now in the occupation, in the sanctification of the land.

So Joshua focuses on God's part. He was totally faithful in every promise that He made. Not one nation was able to withstand Israel. Israel had the upper hand, but that does not mean they fully occupied the land, as we saw in the book of Joshua. And this was to be expected. Exodus 23:27 talks about the time when they would go into the land. The Lord says, “I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.” So from the very start God's plan was that He would remain faithful. And as His people trusted Him, little by little He would drive the others out of the land and give His people full possession of the land. He was not going to decimate the Canaanite population overnight and leave all that had been cultivated to run wild. Joshua 18:1 is another text that leads us to expect this gradual process of the taking of the land. We read there that “the whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh and set up the Tent of Meeting there. The country was brought under their control, but there were still seven Israelite tribes who had not yet received their inheritance. So Joshua said to the Israelites: ‘How long will you wait before you begin to take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you?’” Joshua is saying, “You are in possession of this land, now possess it.”

As we get into the book of Judges we see how successful, or unsuccessful, Israel has been in occupying this land. We see a pattern develop as we begin reading in Judges 1:19, which says, “The Lord was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains because they had iron chariots.” How much theological sense does that make? The Bible says numerous times that arms, weapons, Goliath's armor, and all that stuff of the world is powerless before God. So how are we to interpret that statement from Judges? Were they physically unable to drive the people out? Was it impossible for them? What was the problem? While God is not intimidated by iron chariots, His people were. When we read “they were unable to,” we need to understand that they were somehow incapacitated with fear. They were losing their bearings. They were beginning to think

humanly and no longer theologically. In my own life I try to remind myself on a daily basis to think theologically. That means to bring God into the picture at every opportunity. Live as though you believe that there is a God in heaven and that God is real and active. Maybe Israel had begun to waver about that and they were overly impressed by those iron chariots. So we have to understand that in their faithless fear they were unable to drive out the people.

Read Judges 1:20-36. Do you notice any trends? There was certainly incompleteness to the possession of the land. One could even say there was a progression, even a downward progression, to the possession of the land. There was a progressive compromise on the part of the people. At the beginning of this summary of the conquest, the Israelites were defeating the Canaanites, but some of the Canaanites were allowed to survive and flourish at a distance. Then we discover that some of the Canaanites were allowed to live amongst the Israelites who occupied the land. Next we read that the Israelites were the ones who were allowed to live amongst the Canaanites who occupied the land. And finally, we see that the Israelites were pushed back by the Canaanites and the Israelites were the ones who were allowed to live at a distance. What God had given Israel was gradually lost by failing to obey or trust God and by hanging back faithlessly. Israel finds that even that ground that God had already given is being lost. At the end of the section we read about the boundary of the Amorites when we should be reading about the boundary of the Israelites. Thus we get a sense of a progressive decline of the people in the land that God had given them.

After reading chapter 1 of Judges, we might expect that “disobedience” will be a preliminary theme of the book. There is a crisis in the life of God’s people. There is a crisis of leadership. The judges are not all particularly laudable individuals. They are perhaps merely the best that can be found. There is a crisis in the life of God’s people simply because of their disobedience.

Yet there is a positive message so far in the book of Judges as well: God is faithful. Remember that God is the hero of the Bible. Despite the depressing cycle of the people never learning their lesson, God remains faithful. We could describe that cycle as sin, subjugation, supplication, salvation. Or we could describe it as rebellion, retribution, repentance, restoration. It may be overstating the case to say that the people repented. They certainly cried out to God, but it is unclear that they ever turned away from their sin toward a new life. So you have this depressing cycle and you might expect that eventually God will have His fill. But as the Hebrew puts it, God is long of nose, which means God is patient. He is long-suffering. The Hebrew language uses word pictures. We have an expression in which we say someone has a short fuse. That means that once you do something to light that fuse, it does not take long before there is an explosion. In Hebrew, the nose was parallel to the fuse, so if you were getting angry, your nose would burn. Even the word for “nose” in Hebrew is a word for anger. And if you had a long nose, it meant that your nose could burn a long time before your face would get hot. And God is described as long of nose. Even amidst the human mess that we find in the book of Judges, in the midst of the chaos and the depressing cycle of events and the sinking feeling we get about human nature, we see that God is constant, faithful, and He keeps raising up deliverers. He continues showing His people that He does forgive and He is faithful.