

“They Did Not Drive Them Out Completely”

The ninetieth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 1:1-36; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

While we’ll need to read between the lines to see it, in the opening chapter of the Book of Judges there is already strong evidence that Israel failed to complete the task YHWH assigned to them. That task was to drive all the Canaanites out of the land of promise and then occupy all the land that the Canaanites formerly inhabited so that the displaced Canaanites could not make their way back into Canaan and resettle there. The failure of Israel to do as the LORD commanded will bear much sad fruit as the generations begin to go by. Because of the pagan influence exerted upon Israel by the Canaanites, slowly but surely, the people of Israel will begin to turn their backs on YHWH and do what is right in their own eyes instead of obeying the commandments of God. As that happens, the Israelites will begin to worship and serve Canaanite “gods” as well as engage in all kinds of Canaanite religious practices. And just as Joshua had warned them in his farewell speech, the people of Israel will soon find themselves coming under the covenant curses, all the while crying out to YHWH for deliverance.

We continue our new series on the Book of Judges as we turn our attention to the opening chapter of this very interesting yet perplexing book. Last time we dealt with “big picture” stuff and devoted our time to introductory matters regarding the background and major themes of the Book of Judges. The Book of Judges tells the story of Israel repeatedly falling into sin, God then sending calamity upon his disobedient covenant people as a form of judgment, with God’s people then crying out to him for deliverance, before God sends a series of “judges” or deliverers (tribal leaders), who will pull the people of God back from the brink of disaster. In all of this we see God’s longsuffering mercy toward his people. We also see the innate tendency of the sinful human heart to worship and serve false “gods.” This is a book in which we see the people of God do things which are difficult for us to imagine. We will also see God rescue them in the most surprising of ways.

After the death of Joshua it did not take long for Israel to fall away from YHWH and begin to embrace the religion of the Canaanites. In Judges 2:11-12 we learn of the sorry condition of Israel which characterized this entire period. *“And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger.”* Not only were the people of Israel soon serving Baal instead of YHWH, but they were provoking YHWH (their shield and defender) to wrath, bringing down his judgment upon their own nation.

Not only can the pagan “gods” (especially Baal) do nothing for God’s people in terms of rescuing them from storms and increasing fertility—since the Baals were nothing but the figment of the sinful imagination—but the people of Israel had witnessed God’s great power and how he sent fear throughout the Canaanites when Israel entered the land. Because of this, the Israelites were completely without excuse for turning away from YHWH. Ironically, the people of Israel will find the same things happening to them that God did to the Canaanites. As the author of Hebrews puts it (Hebrews 10:31), *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* The Canaanites learned this to be true when they suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of Israel under the leadership of Joshua. Now God’s own people must learn this lesson as well. Covenant blessings are much better than covenant curses.

We now turn to our text, the first chapter of Judges. The first 21 verses of this chapter recounts Israel's conquest of the southern part of Canaan. As the author describes the actions of the tribes of Judah and Simeon he works from the north toward the south. The text is a bare bones, factual account of the military actions of these two tribes but includes several personal anecdotes within the larger story. Even though we must look carefully, the chapter contains ample evidence of the fact that the people of Israel are already failing to heed Joshua's warning.

In the opening verses of Judges the theme is set for the rest of the book. Israel's slide into apostasy begins in the days after the death of Joshua, when the people of Israel struggle with the critical questions raised by the death of the covenant mediator. "Now that Joshua is dead, who will lead us?" "How do we determine the will of the LORD without a covenant mediator?" This dilemma for the people of God can be clearly seen in the opening verse of Judges. "*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?'*" This statement not only sets the time frame for the Book of Judges—the death of Joshua all the way up the time of the monarchy, when the Lord finally raises up a king for his people—but also clearly indicates that a new chapter in redemptive history has dawned. With the death of Joshua, the time of the Conquest is over. Israel must learn to live in the land without a covenant mediator while remaining faithful to YHWH.¹

As we might expect, the death of Joshua precipitates a crisis of sorts in Israel. Who will lead the people now that Joshua is gone? Who will be their general? To whom will God speak? Some scholars have seen this crisis as a failure on the part of Joshua to name a successor. But the LORD never commanded Joshua to appoint a new covenant mediator. The LORD did command Joshua to distribute the land and designate forty-eight Levitical cities so as to ensure the priests would be scattered throughout the nation to perform sacrifices and instruct the people in the ways of the Lord. Joshua's last act as mediator was to dismiss the people and send them home to their inheritance. With that, everything changed in Israel. While the nation has a covenant with YHWH, each tribe will now govern itself and, as we will see, some of these tribes will be more faithful than the others.

And so the people of Israel inquired of YHWH (presumably using the Urim and Thummin)² and asked "*who will lead us to fight against the Canaanites?'*" This was a pressing question since the people knew they still needed to fulfill the LORD's command given through Joshua to make sure that the Canaanites were cast from all the land. Joshua was their general and commanding officer. Who would take over? As we see in verse 2, the Lord's answer was simple and direct. "*The Lord said, 'Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.'*" Even though Joshua is not there to lead them the people seem to know that while Joshua was a great leader, YHWH is truly Israel's commander-in-chief. The people know that they must seek the will of the LORD in order to receive his blessings. So far so good.

As we read in verses 3-7, the renewed campaign to push out all the Canaanites was soon underway. The tribe of Judah will lead the campaign, inviting the tribe of Simeon to join them. "*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. 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." Things started out fine with the soldiers from the combined tribes

¹ Block, Judges, Ruth, 85.

² Block, Judges, Ruth, 86, contra Cundall, Judges & Ruth, 52.

defeating a large army of Perizzites at Bezek (the location is unknown, but it must be near Jerusalem, given what follows). *“They found Adoni-bezek at Bezek and fought against him and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. Adoni-bezek fled, but they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and his big toes. 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.”* If we look carefully, we see that things have greatly changed.

Adoni-Bezek is probably not a name, but a title, “Lord of Bezek,” (i.e., the king or commander of the city of Bezek). When he was taken prisoner, he should have been put to the sword and killed immediately. This was the penalty to be meted out upon those who illegally occupied Canaan (God’s land) and who lead the Canaanites in the worship of false gods. But instead of being put to death, Bezek was captured, incapacitated and mutilated—his thumbs and big toes were cut-off. Bezek sees this as part of fate—“if you torture others, it will come back around to you.” Instead, this is the first hint the soldiers of Israel have adopted pagan behavior. Instead of seeking to discern God’s will in such a situation, they torture the man, a Canaanite practice. In his weakened and humiliated condition, Bezek dies, rather than be put to death outright as required by YHWH’s instructions as in Deuteronomy 7:1-2; 20:16-17. The Canaanite leaven is already at work in Israel, even this early in the narrative.

The combined army moves quickly to take its next objective—the ancient city of Jerusalem. We read in verse 8 that *“the men of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire.”* Since these forces did not stay to garrison the remains of the city—this job fell to the tribe of Benjamin—it was eventually recaptured by Jebusites and according to 2 Samuel 5 had to be retaken by David sometime later. Meanwhile, the armies of Judah and Simeon set their sights elsewhere—south of Jerusalem. *“And afterward the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, in the Negeb, and in the lowland. And Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (now the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba), and they defeated Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai.”* This was the land Caleb had scouted and was now part of his inheritance. Either this is a recap of Joshua 15:13-15, or else Canaanites had moved back into the area after Israel settled in the land and must be driven out yet again.

In verses 11-15, we learn that the campaign shifts to the city of Debir in the hill county to the southwest of Hebron. In verse 11 we are given a bare-bones statement of what happened—*“From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. The name of Debir was formerly Kiriath-sepher,”* while in verses 12-15, we have the story of Caleb’s very interesting offer to any who were able to drive the Canaanites out of the neighboring city. *“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.”* Othniel would have been Caleb’s nephew. While people today balk at the idea of arranged marriages, this was the custom of that day, and Achsah was fortunate to be given to a heroic figure such as Othniel. Showing a surprising amount of moxie, Achsah balks at the land she was given because it did not have enough water. So Caleb gave her several local springs to make sure that her future animals and crops will flourish.

The reason why this particular story is included in the narrative is because it ties the first generation born in Canaan to that generation which entered the land after wandering throughout the wilderness. This whole scene demonstrates that the children of the faithful generation which entered Canaan married

within the faith of Israel. There were no signs that Canaanization had yet taken place. Caleb (who is now an old man, and one of the few surviving members of that earlier generation) does all that he can to ensure that his daughter marries an Israelite hero, a man of strength and character. More importantly, we will read later on that Othniel will be given the Spirit of the LORD because he served YHWH and he will lead Israel into victory over the king of Mesopotamia. Because of Othniel's leadership, Israel will know forty years of peace after a long and difficult war.

In verses 16-19, there is a brief mention of the campaign to take the region known as Arad (the Negev), to which some in Israel had ancient ties, as well as Gaza, the coastal strip between what is now Israel and Egypt. But notice how this campaign ends. *“And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negeb near Arad, and they went and settled with the people. And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath and devoted it to destruction. So the name of the city was called Hormah. Judah also captured Gaza with its territory, and Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. 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.”* The military alliance between the tribes of Judah and Simeon accomplished much. The Lord was with the tribe of Judah and they took all the hill country, but they could not counter the superior Canaanite technology in the lowlands. The Canaanites were not completely cast out and were allowed to remain on the frontier.

There are a couple of things we should note here. First, this is yet another sign that the sources for Judges come from the early iron age. The reference to iron chariots probably refers to the fact that wooden chariots were reinforced with the use of iron strapping and iron nails, new innovations making a chariot much stronger. The Israelites could not counter this. They did not have the skills. But the point is not that the author is interested so much in the history of armaments as much as he is in the theological significance of this failure. If YHWH can destroy Jericho, he can easily overcome an army of chariots, no matter how much iron strapping they have. This is a failure of will, plain and simple.

Judah's failure becomes clear in light of an earlier prophecy from Joshua. In Joshua 17:17-19 we read the following: *“Then Joshua said to the house of Joseph, to Ephraim and Manasseh, ‘You are a numerous people and have great power. You shall not have one allotment only, but the hill country shall be yours, for though it is a forest, you shall clear it and possess it to its farthest borders. For you shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong.’”* But this did not happen. Why? YHWH was with Judah when he took the hill country, why not in the lowlands too? While the author doesn't tell us why, it is clear that the armies of Judah-Simeon did not complete their task. They were either afraid of the Canaanite forces, or else they were satisfied with the land they had already taken.³ This too does not bode well. This is a sign that the conquest will not be complete. There is already leaven in the loaf. It's just a matter of time. But the situation is far worse elsewhere in Israel.

In verses 21-36 the tone changes from the relatively optimistic account given in verses 1-20 about the tribe of Judah to one of pessimism, as the author of Judges now recounts the compromises going on in the rest of Israel. The slide away from YHWH is already well underway.

While Judah captured most of the land as commanded by the LORD, eventually becoming afraid of the Canaanites or giving up at the last minute, the other tribes did not do near as well or as much. In verse

³ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 100.

21, we read *“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.”* While Judah defeated the armies there and burned the city, the tribe of Benjamin, who were supposed to hold the city, failed to keep the Jebusites out. It is certainly not accidental that in the last three chapters of Judges (chapter 19-21), we will read that the Benjamites are responsible for much mischief. They are mentioned here to highlight the fact that their failure goes all the way back to the beginning of this period of Israel’s history when they failed to hold Jerusalem, and it was then occupied by Jebusites who lived in their midst.

Next comes the account of the house of Joseph, which included the tribes descended from him, Manasseh and Ephraim. We read in verses 22-26, *“The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel, and the Lord was with them. And the house of Joseph scouted out Bethel. (Now the name of the city was formerly Luz.) 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.’ 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. 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.”* Although YHWH was with these men, they fail to complete their task. Bethel is the Hebrew name for the city allied with Ai, while the Canaanite name was Luz.

Apparently, after the Canaanites were defeated at Ai, survivors of its ally Bethel, used the ruins of the city as a place from which to attack Israelites.⁴ Joseph sent scouts who make contact with a man leaving the city who showed them the way into the city. The fact that Joseph’s men dealt kindly with him was probably tied to what Israel did for Rahab when they took Jericho. Only in Rahab’s case, she confessed her faith in YHWH. When Luz was destroyed this man and his family were spared. But he went and built a new settlement on a new site, without ever having to affirm his allegiance to YHWH. The new city (New Luz, with might call it) is symbolic of the fact that Canaanites were now allowed to remain in the midst of the promised land as Israel’s neighbors. This was a clear violation of YHWH’s command and a sign that the people were already shirking their responsibilities to the covenant.

In the balance of the chapter the author describes the efforts of the northern tribes and how miserably they fail to fulfill the mandate God gave them through Joshua. In verses 27-28 we read of the failure of the tribe of Manasseh. *“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. When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely.”* Instead of killing the Canaanites, or driving them out as YHWH commanded, they overcome them and put them into forced labor, completely contrary to the Lord’s command.

The tribe of Ephraim fails as well, as do the tribes of Zebulun, Asher and Naphtali. *“And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them. 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. 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, so the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out. 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*

⁴ Cundall, *Judges & Ruth*, 58-59.

became subject to forced labor for them.” While Judah and Simeon had at least pushed the Canaanites out of most of the land, leaving others on the frontier, in the north, the Canaanites were allowed to remain almost everywhere, as the text reads, “in the midst of Israel.”

As for the tribe of Dan, well they fail miserably. As we read in verses 34-36, they were thoroughly defeated by the Amorites. *“The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. The Amorites persisted in dwelling in Mount Heres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalbim, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labor. And the border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela and upward.”* This leaves the Amorites, who lived in what is now Syria fully in place, and with the sense that they could defeat the Israelites if need be. This is not what God had commanded.

Sadly, the failure of all these tribes to drive the Canaanites out completely will impact Israel for generations to come. From the opening chapter of the Book of Judges, we can see that future generations of Israelites will not be like that generation which entered Canaan. The Canaanization of Israel is already well underway.

What can we take with us from this passage by way of application?

While on its face this chapter describes a series of battles fought by the various tribes of Israel after Joshua died, upon closer inspection we learn that a disaster is at hand. The alliance between Judah and Simeon fared quite well, as most of the Canaanites were driven from the southern part of Canaan. But everywhere else in Israel the Canaanites remain in the midst of the people. Even when the Israelites are victorious militarily, they fail to do as YHWH commanded. Instead of claiming this land for YHWH and obeying his will, the Israelites are already becoming like the Canaanites. The Canaanites are allowed to remain in the midst of people where their paganism will spread everywhere. Israel’s armies are now torturing prisoners, or subjecting their captives to forced labor in violation of God’s command. While it may look as though the people of Israel are exercising compassion on the Canaanites, they are actually engaging in compromise. They are allowing the Canaanite leaven to remain in their midst—against the direct command of YHWH who commanded that the Canaanites be killed or cast out. It would only be a matter of time before Israel was as pagan as the Canaanites around them.

In our New Testament lesson (1 Corinthians 5), we read of the shocking behavior of a man who was a member of the church in Corinth and who was sleeping with his father’s wife. His behavior was so scandalous that even the Greeks (who were every bit as sexually immoral as the Canaanites) were shocked that the church would tolerate such a thing. Paul describes the situation as follows. *“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.”*

Using words which echo God’s command to Israel at the time of the Judges, Paul goes on to say in verses 5-13, *“you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.”*

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. `Purge the evil person from among you.’”

Just as Israel was to cast out the Canaanites because of the corrosive effect of their beliefs and behavior upon the people, so too Paul instructs the Corinthians to remove those from the church who deny the gospel either through heresy or through their behavior. The corrosive effect of heresy and scandalous conduct destroys both the witness and vitality of the church. Removing such people is vital because of the damage they do to the reputation of the church and to the authority of the gospel. It takes years to clean up after one Jimmy Swaggart or Ted Haggard.

It is important to notice that Paul is not picking upon people struggling with sin or those who are weak in faith. Paul has been crystal clear that God justifies the wicked through the death and perfect obedience of Christ received through faith. Paul’s command that the church remove unrepentant rebels from its midst who will not embrace the true gospel or whose conduct denies their profession of faith, protects the church. Just as Israel was to “drive out the Canaanites out completely,” so too the Christian church is to practice church discipline and expel (excommunicate) any from within its midst whose conduct spreads sinful leaven throughout the whole, thereby undermining the authority of the law and polluting the sweetness of the gospel.

Church discipline is not the invention of self-righteous church leaders, it is commanded by God. A church which fails to cast out such people is doing exactly the same thing Israel did at the time of the judges and will suffer exactly the same fate. A church which fails to discipline, is a church which will eventually cease to preach Christ crucified and administer the sacraments according to the word of God. Such a church will soon become more Californian than Christian. The damage will impact generations yet to come. While sinners are always welcomed, this is why Christ’s church can never tolerate heresy, false doctrine, and scandalous behavior in our midst. This is what we must learn from the first chapter of the Book of Judges. Amen.