

Judges features some of the most compelling stories in our Bible. ... Sadly... however... they are mostly stories of decline. But stories of decline are stories of need and stories of need are what we need. You and I must know our need... our desperate need for God... our desperate need for Christ. ... The Book of Judges helps us do that.

Observe with me the way Warren Wiersbe peaks our interest in the Book of Judges in his commentary.

FAMILY FEUD LEAVES 69 BROTHERS DEAD!
POWERFUL GOVERNMENT LEADER CAUGHT IN "LOVE NEST."
GANG RAPE LEADS TO VICTIM'S DEATH AND DISMEMBERMENT.
GIRLS AT PARTY KIDNAPPED AND FORCED TO MARRY STRANGERS.
WOMAN JUDGE SAYS TRAVELERS NO LONGER SAFE ON HIGHWAYS.

Sensational headlines like these... are usually found on the front page of supermarket tabloids... but the above headlines actually describe some of the events narrated in the Book of Judges. ... I'm sure you will immediately notice the contrast of this book (Judges) to the closing chapters of the Book of Joshua... which we concluded our study of... last week. Where we left off in Joshua... Israel was resting from war... and enjoying the riches God had given them in the Promised Land. ... But the Book of Judges will picture this same nation... (Israel)... suffering from invasion after invasion... and subjected to slavery... poverty... and civil war. ... What happened?

The nation of Israel quickly decayed as soon as a new generation took over... a generation that knew neither Joshua... nor... Joshua's God... The new generation... just like so many today... in our culture... and in our churches... kept refusing to acknowledge that they were in need of God.

Judges 2:7-10

Instead of exhibiting spiritual fervor, Israel sank into *apathy*. ... Instead of obeying the Lord... the people moved into *apostasy*. ... And... instead of the nation enjoying law and order... the land was filled with *anarchy*. ... So... for Israel... it was the worst of times.

The key verse to the Book of Judges was saved until the end. The key to unlock our understanding of Judges is its very last verse. 21:25:

Judges 21:25 (ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

“In those days there was no king in Israel...” The book of Judges illustrates the need for a king. ... The king we need is Christ. This book demonstrates the folly of valuing independence too highly... which often happens in our culture... and in our churches. It shows what happens when everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

The book of Judges continues the story of the conquest of Canaan... which began in our last book of study... the book of Joshua. ... Through God's strength... the Israelites had conquered many enemies and overcome many difficulties... but their work was not yet finished. ... They had effectively met many political and military challenges. ... But the challenges they were yet to encounter... their spiritual challenges... would be more difficult... than the physical challenges we studied in Joshua. ... The unholy but attractive lifestyle of the Canaanites... proved more dangerous than their military might. ... The Israelites gave in to the pressure and compromised their faith.

If we attempt to meet life's challenges with human effort alone... we will find the pressures and temptations around us too great to resist. Sometimes God helps us through a particularly rough challenge in our life... perhaps it is financial... or relational... or a health issue. ... And it is as if we thank God and tell Him... *"I've got it from here. I'll call You again when another major crisis comes up..."* Foolishly we think that we only need Him for the big matters of our life.

Now that Israel had fought and won the major victories of entering and taking possession of the land... it is as if they thought the same way... as we sometimes do. ... *"Thanks, God! Run along now... I'll call You when I need You again..."* ... This is always the beginning of our demise... as the Book of Judges will show.

In order for our faith to survive... it must be practiced... moment by moment... day by day. ... It must penetrate every aspect of our lives. ... Beware of starting out strong and then getting sidetracked... initially... by what might seem like... "only a little compromise..." The folly of thinking that we only need God for the big things in our life... and the folly of giving in to compromise... are two of the issues we will be dealing with throughout the Book of Judges. There is a third stream that we especially notice in the opening chapters.

Christianity is not a sprint race. ... It is a long-distance endurance race. We will see Israel's initial enthusiasm... but lack of long-term endurance... This was a third reason for Israel's demise.

Under Joshua... Israel started off strong. Israel was united... as one army. God brought them into the land... and they determinedly pledged their faithfulness to Him. ... But once the land had been divided among the 12 tribes... each tribe was now responsible for driving out the remaining remnants of the enemy from their own territory. Tribe by tribe... they had to do their own mop-up... although the big battles which allowed them to enter and possess the land... had already been won... when all the tribes were battling together as a single army.

United... they were strong! But as individual tribes... in short order... they were sidetracked by fear... weariness... lack of discipline... and wanted to pursue their own interests. ... As a result... their faith began to fade away... and "*the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.*"

By the time of the Book of Judges... a lot of mop-up work was still left to be done. ...To accomplish this follow-through... God raised up a series of tribal leaders... which are called "judges"... (Deciding legal matters was only part of their responsibility. Mainly... they served as Israel's deliverers... and defenders... and revival leaders...) Eventually God will establish something more stable than these temporary figures... to do the same thing. He will anoint a king after His Own heart – David. But that will come much *later*. ... In the meantime... the judges will demonstrate the need for such a righteous king... who would unite the twelve tribes... and keep them true to Yahweh. ...As good of a king that David was... he was very much a flawed leader... (i.e., Bathsheba)... and his success at uniting the 12 tribes of Israel... and keeping them focused on following God's Law... was only short-lived. ... David... and *every* King that came to their throne... leaves us wanting — wanting for Christ.

This morning we will begin to see this need... as we work our way through the first chapter of Judges... and a few verses into the second chapter. This section of Scripture is the first of two prologues to the book. ... This and another prologue that follows will set the tone for the Book. ... Now... we'll take *today's* prologue in two parts. Part One features the relative success ... and lack of follow-through... of Israel's attempts to complete the conquest of the Promised Land in the south (Judges 1:3-21) and the larger failures of these attempts that the north had (Judges 1:22-36).

Limited Success in the South

Judges 1:1-21

The book opens with the apparently unambiguous statement, "*After the death of Joshua*" (1:1)... followed by a seeming sequence of events concerning the tribal occupation of Canaan. ... As is common... the passing of a leader precipitates a political crisis. Who will take charge now?

Although Joshua was a great commander... the people were more vulnerable by missing his spiritual leadership... than being vulnerable because they were without a strong military leader... ... Joshua had kept the people focused on God and his purposes. During their present crisis of leadership... Israel had to learn that their real leader was God. (Their need was for Him.) ... We often focus our hope and confidence on some influential leader... and lose sight of the fact that our greatest need is to acknowledge just how essential God is... as our leader. ... This is what Israel needed to learn... and what the Book of Judges is about.

The children of Israel started out on the right foot in finding a leader. They asked the Lord for His choice of leadership. ... Israel's work began in sincerity and earnest... but we are about to see how it ended in weakness. ... Israel's greatest threat was not a military threat... but a spiritual one. The attitudes that permeated society were "*Me first! Anything goes! Do your own thing! If it feels good do it!*" ... (Not much has changed... has it?) ... All these attitudes were adopted by Israel as we will see and caused their society to decay from within.

Joshua 1:2

I love how the opening scene of this book offers so much promise...! (And I would like for you to notice something with me...) Divine callings often come with Divine promises to encourage those who are called. "*Judah shall go up – I have given the land into his hand...*"

So far... with the first two verses... we are off to a great start! Israel is showing great sensitivity to the will of God... and God responds with great kindness and

mercy. ... For the first-time-reader of this book... they might just expect a continuation of such a triumphant narrative... Especially if they had just read Joshua... which ended so positively and would have helped raise those optimistic expectations. ... You might have noticed a moment ago... when we read up to verse 21... that before we get to the end of chapter one... things do not continue on such a high note... compromise after compromise is allowed... and God will be most disappointed with His people.

Judah asked Simeon to come fight with them. Why...? The Lord answered that only Judah was to lead off in battle. ... I believe that... here... we see the first of several little compromises. ... Judah probably did not have full confidence in the Lord. ... I say this... in part... because their lack of faith will be more obvious later in this same chapter.

The two patriarchs for whom their descendants were named... Judah and Simeon... had the same mother. Leah gave birth to these two boys. They were close... they were “bloodbrothers”... and their tribes remained close. When Joshua divided the land between all the tribes... Simeon’s allotment was only a small island of property in the midst of Judah’s land. Simeon’s portion was a part of Judah’s... and completely surrounded by them... so if Judah was threatened by enemies... it would naturally also be a threat to Simeon. They were in it together.

So it seems to make sense that Judah asked Simeon to come along. ... Compromise often does. It appears to look like good ol’ common sense. ... But when God issues a directive... we must not compromise... even if it seems so logical.

But this would not be their only compromise. The next one also looked like logical action to take.

Judges 1:4-7

The maiming of Adoni-bezek was one example in a long string of actions that demonstrated Israel's tendency to disobey God's instructions by only giving partial obedience. Enemy kings were supposed to be executed, not humiliated.

Deuteronomy 20:16-17 (ESV)

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, 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,

This defeated king recognized God's righteous punishment more clearly than God's people acknowledged God's commands. ... When we understand what God tells us to do... we run great danger if we don't carry out both the letter and the spirit of his words.

This act of mutilation was designed both to humiliate prisoners and to insure they could never serve as warriors again. Unsteady on their feet and unable to grasp a sword, spear or bow, these men could only beg to survive.

These mutilated and helpless prisoners had no resort but to beg at their captor's table. They were kept on display as a sign of the power of their conqueror, eating scraps like dogs under the table (Ugaritic parallels include the god El treating enemy gods in this manner). The irony in this passage is that Adoni-Bezek was reduced to the same condition as the seventy kings he had previously mutilated.

An eye for an eye...a tooth for a tooth... What he had done to so many others... he deserved the same treatment. ... But once again... what looks like common sense is not the issue. ... The issue is our complete obedience.

The author of Judges... demonstrates for us... how the newly arrived Israelites (including the tribe of Judah) have quickly adopted a Canaanite war ethic. Apart from the issue of having spared a man who clearly came under the sentence of

death with the rest of the people... the Israelites use the Canaanites as models when deciding how to treat captives.

God has given you and I some specific instructions about how we are to conduct ourselves among a world of unbelievers who surround us. ... We are to bless... rather than curse those who offend us... we are to offer grace... just as we have been show grace by Christ. ... But how often do we justify ourselves... for not obeying our instruction... by using the world as our model...? ... *“I am not anyone’s doormat!” “It is my right to stand up for myself...” ... “Anyone else would have done far worse to him...!”*

Judges 1:11-15

As a modern reader... you might feel Caleb’s treatment of his daughter as offensive. ... Today... we do not treat daughters as if they are mere property... as an object to be awarded by one man to another for a job well done. ... However... we simply must recognize the culture in which this was written and not try to impose our own cultural ethic on them. ... Interestingly... Achsah does offer a mild protest to her father for the way he has treated her – but it had nothing to do with her feeling devalued as a person. ... (She probably felt honored to be given in marriage to such a military hero...) ... The issue Achsah had with her father... was the worthlessness of the desert property Othniel and Achsah had been given. They would not be able to grow any sort of garden to feed their family.

Achsah first asks her husband try to do something about it... Man-to-man business deals were the most culturally acceptable way. ... But apparently... Othniel was a better soldier than a negotiator. So (forward-thinking) Achsah seized an opportunity and took over to solve a problem which neither her husband or her father had even recognized yet... would be a problem. Caleb must have said... *“Oh... of course... I’m so sorry I didn’t think of that... here take two abundant springs... take all you need!”*

I wondered why this story appeared right here in the narrative. What does it have to do with the flow of thought that the author of Judges is giving to us...? ... After thinking about this for a while... I've concluded that the flow of thought is "incompleteness." It is lack of follow-through and compromise... and how harmful it is. ... As good of a man as Caleb was... and he most certainly would have wanted his descendants (through his daughter) to be provided for... but his gift of land did not have proper follow through... until he was challenged by his daughter... who did so in a respectful manner.

One more observation... before we turn our attention to the northern tribes. Please look at verse 19 with me.

Judges 1:19

If the Lord is with them... what difference would this make? ... Why stop now? ... Why would they fail now? ... Yes... the Canaanites had the most sophisticated weapons of warfare of that day. Israelite soldiers would have been absolutely powerless to stop a speeding iron chariot bearing down hard upon them. ... But God was with them!

The bottom line is this... Judah failed for the same reason we fail and Peter failed according to the incident Matthew records for us is Matthew 14:24-31. ... Do you remember how a huge storm overtook the disciples very late at night... and how they feared for their lives...? Suddenly they saw Jesus walking across the water. Peter called out to Him and said... *"Jesus... if that is really You... walking on top of the waves... then allow me to come out to You..."* Jesus called Peter out of the boat. ... Peter took a few steps... then looked down... and immediately began to sink.

We get our eyes off the Lord! Many times we don't know what to do... Our

relationship with God deteriorates. This failure of Judah... the leading tribe... soon effected the rest of the nation.

Now that we have seen some of the relative success of the South... along with glimpses of their compromise... lets turn our attention now to the North. Here we see more pronounced compromise... and failure.

Failure in the North

Judges 1:22-26

The city was obviously closed up like Jericho... but when a man slipped out of the city... the spies went to him and promised him mercy if he would help them. ... Though the city was closed up there were secret entrances into the city. The man showed the spies one of these secret entrances where they could enter the city though the gates were closed.

But... once again... what is the compromise...? ... They were not to make any deals with the Canaanites and they were not to spare any of their lives. ... But they did with this man... and he certainly did not respond the same way Rahab and her family did... when Israel showed them similar mercy. Rather than converting over to worship the God of the Israelites... he defiantly goes away and starts a new city to continue his old ways.

Judges 1:27-36

In the north, the tribes of Israel repeatedly failed to drive out the Canaanites. As a result, the Canaanites lived among the people of Israel. The Israelites tolerated the presence of the pagans. Furthermore, as the campaign continues, two tribes of Israel, Asher and Naphtali, are reported as living among the Canaanites. First, the Israelites allow the Canaanites to live

among them; then, the Canaanites allow the Israelites to live among them. Furthermore, the Amorites were strong enough to force the tribe of Dan to live at a distance. Finally, the Israelites are described as living not within their own border but within the border of the Amorites. Part of the Promised Land, which the Lord had given to the Israel, is still depicted as belonging to the pagans.

The Israelites disobeyed God. They lacked the commitment to do what God said: to drive out all the enemies of the promised land. They became complacent and lethargic—comfortable enough to compromise. They were not willing to make a full and total commitment to God—not willing to do everything God commanded.

The experience of Israel speaks strongly to us. Far, far too often we become satisfied with what we have in Christ. Doing and committing any more to Christ would require too much struggle and discipline, too much energy and effort, too much money and sacrifice. The result for us is tragic: we begin to disbelieve God and fail to trust Him. We become complacent, lethargic, and too comfortable. Before long, we begin to compromise with the worldliness of the world.

Jesus brings salvation and victory to us. He effects a new covenant so that we might be empowered by the Holy Spirit to worship and serve God. Sometimes... perhaps... as in the case of Judah and Simeon... we have relative victories... Things seem to work out well. ... But let's now be very honest. ... Other times... we look far more like the northern tribes. We fail to serve God's purposes. Instead of trusting God... we cut deals with sin.

Somehow... we gain a false sense that we really don't need God. ... So we dethrone God and become the rebel rulers of our own lives... trying to

solve all our problems through false gods... such as money... sex... power... and success. We try to utilize these as a way to meet our needs... and satisfy our passions.

Sin, the scriptures tell us, is a malevolent tyrant that must be driven out of our lives. ... Once you let sin in... it's hard to kick it out. ... It tends to make a home near you... so to speak... the way the former inhabitant of Bethel built a pagan outpost in the Promised Land and called it Luz. ... And sin is never happy with just a little... it wants everything. ... A little sin is never enough.

There is a principle which a former pastor of mine... Gene Selander... calls the Law of Diminishing Returns. ... First... a little sin will satisfy. ... But over time of giving into it... the sin isn't quite enough... it has to go deeper into wrongful behavior. Eventually the giving into that much sin no longer satisfies... and the sin must be intensified. And on and on it goes... going deeper and deeper. ... It might start off as an impure thought life... but when that no longer satisfies... it must seek out wrongful images. Once that no longer gratifies... seeking out a physical activity is necessary. ... That might be inappropriate heterosexual encounters. ... But once bored with that... alternative sexual encounters... or encounters with illicit drugs are sought after. ... Do you see what I mean...? Once sin is allowed... it demands more and more.

The Jews eventually became so accustomed to the sinful ways of their pagan neighbors... that those ways did not seem sinful anymore. ... Believers can also get caught in this trap.

In the words of C.S. Lewis, sin's poisonous formula is "an ever-increasing craving for an ever-diminishing pleasure." First, we tolerate sin, the way the northern tribes tolerated the pagans. Then we allow sin to live near us. When

we do so, sin pushes us further away from God and from trusting in him. Finally, but often subtly, apart from our awareness, sin takes control of our lives.

Has something taken control of your life and crowded out devotion to God? Has your schedule taken over? Has your cell phone, Facebook, or the Internet taken over? Have the tools, that were supposed to help you, overshadowed the God who helps you? Has the lust for money, power, sex, or success taken over? Has alcohol or drugs taken over? Has everything taken over, crowding out the one thing, allegiance to Christ, that puts everything in perspective?

How, then, within the framework of our covenant with God, do we deal with sin, this malevolent tyrant? Listen to the words of the Angel of the Lord.

Judges 2:1-5

Some people think that God doesn't care about their sinfulness. “...*He won't mind! I'll just ask Him to forgive me!*” ... I want to assure you that God is CONCERNED. The Lord asks, “*Why have you done this? You have not obeyed my voice!*” God hasn't changed. He is STILL concerned about our disobedience. If the Lord was personally present... would He make these statements to you? ... You have not obeyed my Word! Why?

The Lord isn't simply accusing... He is asking. “*Why have you done this?*” ... I don't think this was merely a rhetorical question. We often don't stop and think clearly about the “*Why*” of our own disobedience... Do we...? Perhaps we really don't know... at a conscious level... why we did what we did. ... And perhaps... at some deeper level... if we were to figure out what motivated us... we could see the fault of that motivation and remove it from our life. ... This really is a good question. ... Why do

you lust...? Are you thinking that God has held out on you...?

But the Angel of the Lord's words... also gives us a way forward.

First, the angel reminds Israel what the Lord has done for them. We remember what the Lord has done for us in Christ, who for the sake of love defeated Satan and won us as his bride, leading us into the kingdom of God in advance of the day when the kingdom comes in full. We revel in the story that seems too good to be true, like a fairy tale, but is true nevertheless. We revel in our own stories and the particular ways that God has blessed us in Christ.

Place all around you... where you spend large portions of your time... several visual reminders of what the Lord has done for you... including photos of the family that you yearned to have... maybe this would be a photo collage... as a memorial of significant seasons in your past. Go to it and meet with the Lord... let your eyes linger over these reminders of God's faithfulness to you. Remember... and revel!

Second, make use of the question that the angel asks, "Why have you done this?" ... When our girls were young and Patti or I would ask them why they did something wrong... they respond with the timeless answer, "*I don't know.*" But... as adults... or teenagers... you and I are old enough to probe the deeper regions of our hearts... where the battle for faithfulness is won and lost. We need to try and excavate our motivations.

Of course... understanding your motivations does not necessarily enable you to change what you do... but it can be an important step in the process of renewal. ... Motivations stem from beliefs. If you know the false belief... you

can apply the truth to it. The Lord doesn't just care about our behavior; he's more concerned with our hearts. Jesus, for example, asked his disciples, "Why are you so afraid?" (Mark 4:40).

Third, the Israelites responded to the angel's words by weeping in sorrow. Remembering what the Lord has done for us on the one hand and coming to terms with what we have done on the other hand can create a collision in the heart that produces godly sorrow... maybe even tears of godly sorrow. The Israelites worshiped by offering sacrifices to the Lord. We worship by offering the Lord our broken and contrite hearts.

How do you deal with sin? ... You deal with sin by drawing it up into worship. ... Sin is simply our convenient substitute for God. ... The very thing we ask sin to do for us... to meet our needs and satisfy the deep craving of our souls... is something that only God can do.

In worship... we acknowledge this... as we experience God. ... In remembering and reveling in what God has done for us... we discover... in an experiential way... that Yahweh is superior to our substitutes. ... Truthfully... nothing compares to experiencing God. ... Any temporary enjoyment that sin brings shrivels when we experience God. ... Then... when we open up with him about our sin... we discover that He forgives us in Christ... that instead of moving away from us... He moves toward us.

Sin is a malevolent tyrant, but worship takes it down.

Worship the Lord. Meet with Him daily! ... I know that can live without such encounters with God... but I also know this: I cannot thrive. ... The reason that I know this... is because when I've neglected meeting with God... I've paid a

price: I've granted sin a place.

The Holy Spirit empowers us to worship God and serve him. Perhaps the Spirit is stirring in you even now.

Where will you go from here... from Bokim... the place of tears?