

A Reading in Judges 1

Incomplete Conquest and the Spiritual Inheritance — July 6, 2019

We are reading Judges chapter 1, which outlines the conquest of Canaan by the children of Israel and points out how incomplete it was — which is the moral entry to a book where there is a great deal that is not pleasing to the Lord. We also read the last verse of the book, Judges 21:25, to set the frame:

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

A Declining Chapter

The book of Judges is a very sad book. It starts out better than it ends. There is a declension — things get worse and worse the longer you read. The last judge was not the best one. And did you notice in chapter 1 that the more verses you read, the worse the story gets? At first the Israelites dispossessed the inhabitants of the land. Then they did not dispossess them. Then, as in verse 29, the Canaanites dwelt among them. Then in verse 32, the Asherites dwelt among the Canaanites. And finally in verse 34, in the case of Dan, the Amorites would not suffer them to come down to the valley at all. So instead of having victory over the Canaanites, Israel experienced a gradual sequence of less and less success.

The charge from Moses in Deuteronomy 20:16 was plain: Of the cities of these peoples which Jehovah thy God giveth thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth, but shalt utterly devote them to destruction — the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites — that they teach you not to do according to all their abominations which they have done unto their gods. The Lord gave a reason. It was not arbitrary: these peoples would be an influence to teach God's people the practices they had carried out in His land in rejection of Him. And the long history has borne that out exactly. Even Solomon was taught idolatry by the peoples that were not exterminated. The enemies that are Israel's implacable foes today trace themselves to these very peoples. There are solemn and lasting results from not obeying God.

The Inheritance — A Picture for Us

What does all this have to do with us? Canaan represents the inheritance God has for every believer. It is a spiritual inheritance — the truth of God in His word, laid out like a good land before us. Joshua could say: the good land lies before you; now take your inheritance. They had to fight for it.

Is it easy for you and me to pick up God's word and simply absorb its truth? I have to fight for it. It is a wonderful thing to open God's word and read what He has to say. But understanding all of it does not come without effort. And what is it a fight against? Our flesh. We who love the Lord as our Savior have two natures. The nature received from Adam — fallen, knowing only how to sin — and the new nature that God gave us when He saved us, the life of Christ in us, which can only please God. There is a war going on between those two. The old nature says, this is too much work; it is complicated; I do not want this. And the new nature says, I want the inheritance. God has put it there. Now go and fight for it; get the enemy out of the way and you will have it.

Whatever is written in scripture was written for our learning. So this is not merely interesting ancient history. The application to each of us is that God has an inheritance, and we need to take possession of it.

After the Death of Joshua

The chapter opens: And it came to pass after the death of Joshua. It is worth noting that Joshua in Hebrew is the same name as Jesus in Greek — so much so that in the book of Hebrews, the King James translation actually reads "Jesus" where it means Joshua, because the two names are identical. The children of Israel had victory as long as the man with the same name as Jesus was alive. When he was gone, their victories were no longer what they had been.

Is that not the key to the chapter, and to the whole book of Judges? Without the Lord Jesus, it is not possible for men to get the victory in spiritual things. We cannot hope by diligent application, courage, and fortitude to be successful Christians if we leave out the Lord Jesus Christ. With the Lord Jesus, the victory is His. That is the difference between the book of Joshua and the book of Judges. And note how the book of Joshua begins: Moses my servant is dead. The victories that follow in Joshua are not won by law-keeping. Moses — the law — is dead, and is sorely missed. There is a different spiritual power at work in Joshua than in Moses, and that power leads to victory.

Judah First — Worship Before Service

Jehovah said: Judah shall go up. Judah was not the firstborn by birth — that distinction had passed to Joseph in the double portion — but Judah was the tribe from which came the chief ruler, and from which our Lord Jesus came. The name Judah means praise. So the first lesson of the chapter is not a lesson of failure: it is the word of God that praise — worship — comes first.

If Israel had truly taken that to heart and made worship the first priority, the chapter would not have gone downhill as it did. We often speak of the order in Scripture: worship comes before service.

Christians are to be occupied with worship, and then with serving the Lord, in that order. At the end of Judges, in chapter 20, we see this illustrated in the story of Benjamin's sin. All Israel came up to punish Benjamin, and they were soundly defeated — twice, losing twenty or thirty thousand men. Only when they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings did the victory come. The burnt offering speaks of the pleasure God took in the Lord Jesus, entirely for God — not for us. The peace offerings speak of the peace we have through Christ's sacrifice. Once worship was brought in, the victory followed.

The slide in our chapter begins, I would suggest, at verse 3. The Lord said Judah should go up. And what is the first thing Judah does? He enlists the arm of the flesh. He says to Simeon his brother: come up with me into my lot, and I will go with you into yours. If the Lord had told Judah he could carry this thing out, he could have. The pattern is the same as Moses at the burning bush — given a commission by God, and immediately asking for help. It is a recurring theme: God gives someone something to do, and instead of going in faith, that person turns to the arm of the flesh.

We think of Moses burdened with judging Israel, whose father-in-law Jethro said, this is too much — let us set up a structure. There is no record that God sanctioned that arrangement. Again when Israel demanded flesh to eat, Moses told God: it is too much. The Lord said, I will share the spirit that is upon you with seventy princes. He did not say there would be more power — only that the same measure would now be divided among seventy-one. And we do not read that that was a good thing either. The lesson in every case is the same: if the Lord gives me something to do, I should carry it out in faith and look to Him alone for strength, not reach for the arm of the flesh.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: in the calling in which you were called, therein abide with God. The Lord calls each of us individually. There is no organization that appoints a task and says, this is what you should be doing. The Lord calls, and we go. That is what brings success, because the Lord is the one doing the work on earth — not us.

Adonai Bezek — The Principle of Reaping

The story of Adonai Bezek is instructive. His name means Lord of Bezek. He had cut off the thumbs and great toes of seventy kings, who gleaned under his table. When Judah caught him and did the same to him, he said: As I have done, so God has requited me. He understood the principle of reaping what one sows.

But notice that Israel let him live — crippled, but alive. The Lord's commandment was to utterly destroy. This is a recurring theme: they carried out the command, but only half-heartedly. When Saul was told to destroy the Amalekites entirely and he reserved the best animals for sacrifice, the Lord said obedience is better than sacrifice. Over and over again they went through the motions of obedience while holding something back. It never went well.

Jerusalem and the Jebusites — The Undivided Heart

Verse 21: The children of Benjamin did not dispossess the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, but the Jebusites dwelt with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day. Follow this forward to chapter 3, verse 5: the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites and took their daughters as wives and gave their daughters to their sons, and served their gods. And David in his day found the Jebusites still there, taunting his armies. They persisted all through Israel's history. There is no account that every last Jebusite was ever removed.

What does Jerusalem speak of for us? It was the city where the Lord put His name — the center of worship. If we do not want to fully deal with the flesh with respect to that which represents the place where the Lord is worshipped, it will always be a thorn in the side. It will lead to greater and greater sin, just as the Jebusites led Israel eventually to intermarriage and idol worship.

For each of us individually: where does worship of the Lord take place? In my heart. And my heart can be divided. There may be Jebusites there. If I do not really want to completely put away those things that divide my heart, they will lead to idolatry — for idolatry is simply that which seeks to be worshipped instead of the Lord. Idols are not necessarily made of stone. They can be desires of my heart drawing me away from the Lord. Those things that God has told us to put completely away must be completely put away.

Othniel, Achsah, and the City of the Book

Amid all the failure in this chapter, there are two bright pictures. The city of Debir was formerly named Kirjath-sepher, which means the city of the book. Caleb said: He that smites the city of the book and takes it, to him will I give Achsah my daughter as wife. And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it. Debir itself means the word of God — so the city was renamed from the city of the book to the word of God. Taking it was the hazard of his life, and it mattered to him. There is the key to spiritual victory: we should spend much of our spiritual energy in understanding God's book. The 66 portions of Scripture are, as it were, 66 love letters from God. Because God is infinite, each of them is as deep as the ocean — and we approach with little cups.

Achsah, his wife, urged him to ask her father for a field. Then she herself sprang down from her donkey and asked Caleb: give me a blessing; for thou hast given me a southern land — give me also springs of water. And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

The upper springs and the lower springs. These have been linked to the whole of the book of Ephesians — the upper springs answering to chapters 1–3, the heavenly truth, the unsearchable riches of Christ; and the lower springs to chapters 4–6, the practical walk. She got everything. And she got it by asking

— by taking the low place of a beggar before her father. Many a man is too proud to beg, and so he does not receive all the blessings God has for him. You can never be higher than by taking a low place before God.

Rebecca jumped off her camel when she met Isaac in the field; Achsah sprang down from her donkey when she came to Caleb. There may be a lesson for all of us in that — not only for women. Life is rich with blessing from God, even in a world full of sin and darkness. There is a blessing that awaits us if only we will get down off the high place and ask for it.

Caleb and Achsah stand in contrast to everything else in the chapter. They got it all — while around them everyone else was coming short, failing, leaving enemies in the land. Things were worse and worse. But Achsah did not give up. She asked for more. Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

May the Lord lead us each to value our spiritual inheritance and fight for possession of it, beginning with worship and ending with His praise.