

Prologue to the Book of Judges

Israel's Failures and the LORD's Response

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Note: All biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago this month I attended a Christian youth camp and made a number of things right with the Lord. I stayed in a cabin and got to know some of the guys who bunked there pretty well. I recall that one particular guy also made some decisions to serve the Lord that week. Since I was part of a missionary family, we did a lot of traveling, and I had a chance to visit that cabin-mate's city in Ohio two or three months after camp ended. I called the guy on the phone when I was there, thinking that we might get together. To my surprise, he wasn't really interested in seeing me.

As time moved along, I came to the conclusion that his renewed determination to serve the Lord must have been short-lived. I concluded that he had returned to whatever self-indulgent lifestyle he had carried on before the camp. This turn of events was disillusioning, but the scene painted in the first few chapters of Judges is cause for much greater dismay.

As we reflect on some ancient stories today, let's keep in mind what the Apostle Paul said:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. . . .
Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Cor. 10:6, 11)

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Rom. 15:4)

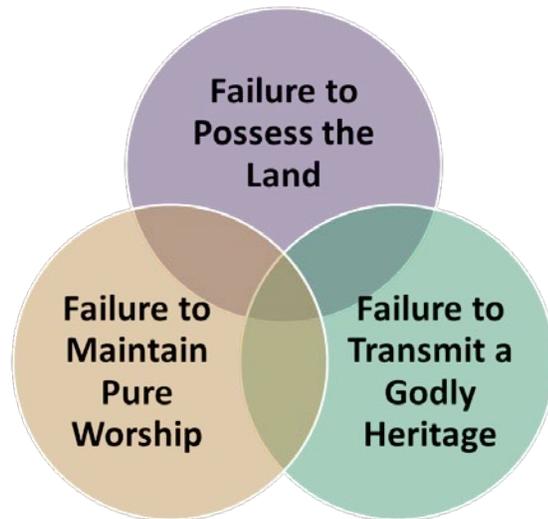
The scene at the end of the book of Joshua was hopeful:

- Progressive possession of the land
 - Occupation of the land, possession of much of it
 - Inspiring example of Caleb's courage at an advanced age (14:6-15)
- Architectural and ritual memorials intended to encourage transmission of faith from generation to generation (Schaeffer 83-99)
 - Stone memorials (e.g., 4:1-8, 19-24)
 - Circumcision (5:1-9)
 - Passover (5:10-12)
- Pledges to familial faithfulness (24:15)

As the book of Judges begins, the scene quickly deteriorates. In fact, the prologue to the book (1:1-3:6), which precedes the accounts of any particular judge, describes three significant failures on the part of Israel. We now turn our attention to these failures in anticipation of learning about the remedies that God offered in response to them.

A Tale of Three Failures

Israel's three defects were very much interdependent, and it is difficult to ascertain how they began to slip from their position at the end of Joshua's life. We will examine the three failures in the order in which the text introduces them.



Failure to Possess the Land (1:1-2:5)

Many of us watched the opening ceremonies of the summer Olympic Games last Friday night. Thousands of athletes paraded into the stadium in London. You can pretty much bet that all of them got where they are through much effort, dedication, discipline, and sacrifice. While they may have natural talents and abilities, those had to be honed for them to compete on an international level. In short, these athletes have reached out to seize what is difficult but potentially achievable. One might say the same of achievement in any area—academics, career, ministry, etc. This sense of challenge is analogous to what the people of Israel faced in seeking to drive out the wicked nations from the Promised Land.

The first chapter of Judges describes Israel's relation to the inhabitants of Canaan following the death of Joshua. The narrative is structured so as to convey the sense of an emerging crisis:

- Judah and Simeon undertake a series of military actions in various cities and territories (1: 1-20). They secure unqualified victories in Bezek, Jerusalem, Hebron, and elsewhere. Significantly, the narrative begins with Israel seeking the LORD (v. 1). However, a hint of trouble appears toward the end of this section: "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" (v. 19).
- Notwithstanding Judah's capture and burning of Jerusalem (1: 8), the neighboring tribe of Benjamin failed to expel the Jebusites from the city (1:21).
- "The house of Joseph"—presumably, a collective reference to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh—attacked and defeated the city of Bethel (1:22-26).

- Chapter 1 ends with a list of tribes that failed to drive out the pagan inhabitants of the land:
 - Manasseh (vv. 27-28)
 - Ephraim (v. 29)
 - Zebulun (v. 30)
 - Asher (vv. 31-32)
 - Naphtali (v. 33)
 - Dan (v. 34)
- Clearly, the author of the narrative intended to show that Israel had failed to obey God’s directive to possess the land of Canaan and drive out its ungodly inhabitants.

Chapter 2 begins with the account of a visit from “the angel of the LORD” (vv. 1-5). This personage rebuked the people of Israel for their apathetic coexistence with the heathen in and around them. One aspect of the Israelites’ military failure was the fact that it had left pagan altars intact. God had directed them to destroy such objects. This sets the stage for the discussion of Israel’s third error, the failure to maintain pure worship.

Failure to Transmit a Godly Heritage (2:6-10)

How many members of the audience came from a family where at least one parent was a genuine believer? How about a family with at least one such grandparent? How many of you can attest that those family members had a significant impact on your faith development? Now imagine for a moment that those family members had taken their faith less seriously . . . had lost their fervor for following God . . . had shirked their responsibility to pass along their knowledge of God to the next generation. Where might you be had they failed in that way? When we do this sort of speculation, we can begin to sense some of what went wrong in the time of the judges.

Along with their failure to dispossess the heathen nations of their land, the tribes of Israel allowed their collective knowledge of God to deteriorate as the generations passed. Faithfulness to the LORD persisted not only until Joshua died, but also during the lifetime of “the elders who outlived Joshua” (v. 7). Not only was the younger generation too young to have experienced God’s hand in bringing the nation into the Promised Land (vv. 7, 10). In addition, it the authors states flatly that this generation “did not know the LORD” (v. 10).

As noted in the introduction to the lesson, the law given to Moses contained numerous provisions for transmitting the faith from one generation to the next. Among such provisions were injunctions to observe a calendar of holidays and Sabbaths; to perform rituals such as circumcision; and to engage one’s children in a constant program of instruction. Furthermore, the Israelites’ occupation of the Promised Land was marked by the erection of several stone memorials which were to serve as visual reminders of God’s past work on the nation’s behalf.

It is evident that the LORD intended for Israel to hand down its faith from generation to generation. Therefore, one is forced to conclude that the lack of knowledge reported in verse 10 was the product of inattentiveness to the LORD’s provisions. As a result of this gradual spiritual breakdown, the Israelites not only lived alongside the ungodly peoples that had preceded them in Canaan; in fact, they entered into marriage relationships with them (3:5-6). This was surely the path to further spiritual compromise.

Failure to Maintain Pure Worship (2:11-13, 16-19)

My family and I drove home from the Omaha, Nebraska, area last Monday—a nine-hour drive when you factor in traffic due to construction and accidents. Among the things that help us pass the time in the car is playing a scavenger hunt game. Basically, we build a list of things that we’re more or less likely to see as we drive the miles ahead of us. Then we each keep our eyes open for those things.

One of the things that my wife put on the list was a Kansas City Chiefs logo. We started the hunt in Kansas City traffic, so I thought it would be no problem for us to find the logo on a car or building. Would you believe that we drove about 170 miles before we found a Chiefs logo on the back of a car? I surmise that Kansas City residents have gotten fed up with the team’s lackluster performance in recent years—OK, maybe more than a few years. The point is that many of the fans appear to be of the “fair weather” variety. As a Chiefs fan, this frustrates me. But imagine when we begin to think of spirituality in terms of being a fan, and when, for whatever reason, we lose our enthusiasm for God. Well, that’s pretty much what happened in the book of Judges—with terrible consequences.

As noted earlier, by failing to drive out the wicked nations from the land, Israel lived in the vicinity of heathen worshipers and the physical manifestations of their cultic practices. But God’s people went much further than this: they participated actively in the worship of false gods, including Baal and Ashtoreth (vv. 11, 13). Baal was known “as the god who has power over rain, wind, clouds, and therefore over fertility” (Jung 378; see also Merrill 160-61). Equivalents of Ashtoreth were worshiped across various ancient cultures. In Canaanite religion Ashtoreth “was worshiped locally as the consort of Baal, depicted in the nude with horns on her head, and was thus a member of the fertility cult” (Sayce and Jung 320).

The text mentions the following dimensions of this corrupt worship:

- It was “evil in the sight of the LORD” (v. 11) and incited his anger (vv. 12, 14).
- It constituted a forsaking of the LORD, and thus a denial of the One who had delivered them from Egyptian bondage (v. 12). Similarly, it was a detour from the path that their forefathers had followed in obedience to God’s law (vv. 17, 20).
- It entailed a lustful pursuit (vv. 12, 17). Verse 17 (“they whored after other gods”) employs *zanah*, a common Hebrew word signifying literal or figurative prostitution (Wood 246).
- It led Israel to bow in reverence and service to idols, thus supplanting the LORD’s rightful place (v. 12, 17, 19).

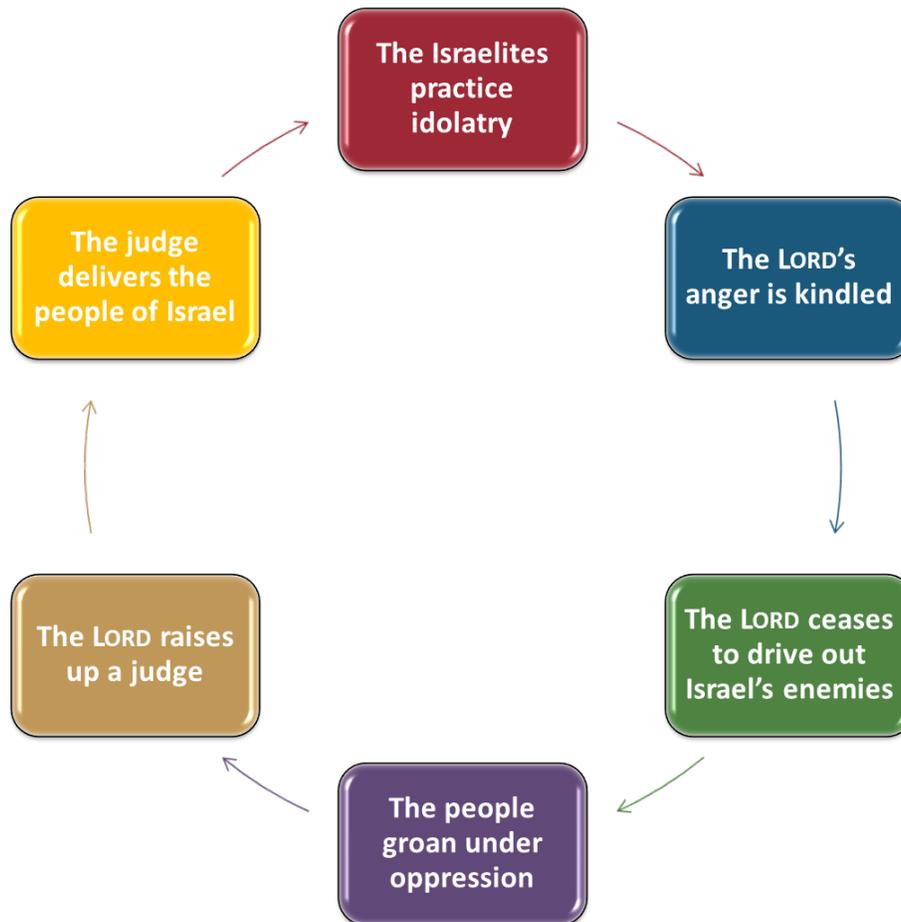
The Cycle of Increasing Corruption (2:11-19)

The Basic Cycle

The second chapter of Judges outlines a pattern of events that repeats itself in the life of Israel throughout the rest of the book. The essential elements are as follows:

- Israel strays into idolatry and forsakes the LORD (vv. 11-13).
- The LORD’s anger is aroused (vv. 12, 14).
- The LORD abandons Israel to the attacks of its enemies (vv. 14-15).
- Israel cries out to the LORD in great distress (vv. 15, 18).

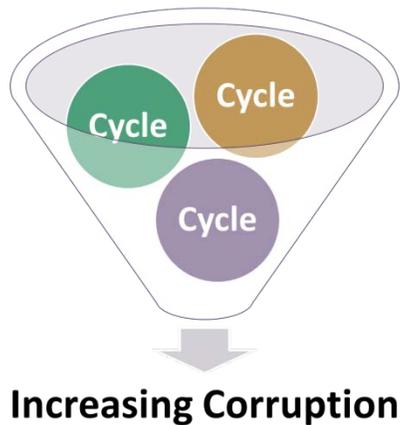
- The LORD raises up a judge to deliver Israel from its enemies (vv. 16, 18), but the nation soon sinks into idolatry and begins the cycle again (vv. 17, 19ff).



A Downward Spiral

The cycle described above is certainly an accurate portrayal of life in the time of the judges. However, taken at face value, it might imply that, at least during upswings, things were better than they actually were. However, there is more to the story. Not only was there a cycle of ups and downs, but there was a general downward trend throughout the period. This is perhaps conveyed most clearly at the end of chapter 2:

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he said, "Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not." So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua. (2:19-23)



The LORD's Response

So far we have established clearly that Israel failed in three critical areas in the generations that followed the death of Joshua. It is fitting to ask how the LORD responded to Israel's failures. To some extent we have already begun to answer this question. The LORD's response included elements of action and inaction.

Action: The Judges

God responded to Israel's wandering by raising up judges to lead them out of military conflict and into a more faithful walk with Himself. These judges had a broad range of duties, as Andrew Bowling explains:

The traditional meaning of the word *judge* has obscured the full scope of the office. The basic idea of "judging" is governing . . . with all its implied functions. Samuel's combined religious, administrative, executive, and judicial responsibilities best illustrate the full range of this office. Due to historical conditions, however, the military-executive function of deliverance from enemies is underscored in the Book of Judges. (158)

Inaction: Exposure to Enemy Attacks

The LORD responded to Israel's infidelity in a second way: by failing to intervene as readily in the nation's time of need. While it might sound inappropriate for a loving and all-powerful God to take this stance, the Israelites needed to learn some things through suffering. The LORD would not allow His chosen to treat Him merely as the solution to their problems. He wanted to be their God, and for them to conduct themselves as His people. The author of Judges emphasizes that the LORD's inaction was designed to test Israel, hopefully leading them to follow Him faithfully:

"Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, *in order to test Israel by them*, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not." . . . Now *these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them*, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. (2:20-22; 3:1)

As a result of Israel's infidelity and the LORD's inaction, the following peoples remained in and around the Promised Land: Philistines, Canaanites, Sidonians, Hivites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, and

Jebusites (3:3-5). Thus was fulfilled the warning that these nations “shall become thorns in your sides” (2:3; cf. Num. 33:55; Josh. 23:13). Not only was Israel subject to attacks from neighboring nations; its exposure to pagan nations diminished its distinctive spiritual and social identity: “And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods” (3:6).

Application & Conclusion

As the discussion above has shown, after Joshua’s death, the nation of Israel failed on at least three important counts. Why? Why would Israel stray from worshiping the God who had delivered them from Egyptian slavery and brought them into a good land? Why would they fail to possess the land that they had occupied? Why would they neglect to transmit their faith and values to the next generation?

The *ESV Study Bible* provides the following explanation:

What was it about Canaanite religion and culture that proved to be such an irresistible attraction? The land of Canaan was awe-inspiring to the Israelites, as can be seen in the story of the spies who reported on its wealth and strength (Numbers 13). To a recently freed slave people, accustomed to the hardships of life in the wilderness, the cosmopolitanism and material wealth of Late-Bronze-Age Canaan, with its large urban centers, could not have failed to impress. The Canaanites were clearly superior to the Israelites on many levels: art, literature, architecture, trade, political organization, and more. It is not difficult to see how the Israelites would have been tempted by the elaborate Canaanite religious system, which ostensibly supported—and even provided—all of this.

One prominent feature of Canaanite religion was its highly sexualized orientation. The system of sacred prostitutes —“priestesses” of Baal—allowed people to combine sensual pleasures with worship of Baal. This undoubtedly was attractive to many Israelites (cf. the Israelites seduced by the Moabite women in Numbers 25). (locations 49203-12)

Compounding the attractions of advanced culture and the seductions of sensual religion was the sheer difficulty of following the LORD. The fact is that the path of worshiping God, pursuing His kingdom, and transmitting the heritage of faith require discipline, commitment, and a willingness to go against the flow. The Israelite community as a whole failed in its mission during the time of the judges. Much the same can be said of culturally Christian countries in recent generations, as Francis Schaeffer observed:

We come to a group of people who did not imitate Joshua’s continual choice. The children of Israel remembered for a time the choice they had made at Joshua’s farewell, but they then forgot it. And thus came the confusion, the sorrow and the total lawlessness of the period of the judges.

We are seeing exactly the same shift in our own generation. Those of us from the Reformation countries have experienced a Christian consensus. (This does not mean that every individual was a Christian but that society was strongly influenced by Christian values.) But my generation and the generations immediately preceding me made a bad choice, and so *we now live in a post-Christian world. The choices of faith have been set aside and forgotten*, and, accordingly, the confusion, sorrow and lawlessness of the time of the judges is [sic] occurring in our generation. If you are a member of the younger generation, you are a recipient of the consequences of this bad choice. This is who you are. To understand yourself, you must understand that you have grown up in a post-Christian world. (Schaeffer 210-11)

God has provided the resources that we need to be victorious. The Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Body of Christ are sufficient to enable us to stand faithfully in the midst of a dark world. The question is, “Are we willing to dismiss the world’s opinion of us, to take up the discipline and make the sacrifices entailed in fulfilling our mission?”

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