

September 20, 2020

THE CONTEXT OF ISRAEL'S "CANAANIZATION"

Judges 1:1-3:6

(1 of 3 in a series through Judges)

On January 28, 1986 I remember sitting with my eyes glued to the television, having no idea that my classmates and I were about to witness one of the greatest tragedies shown on live tv. My classmates and I were watching the launch of the Space Shuttle *Challenger*. There were seven crew members onboard the shuttle, but the reason we were watching it live in my class that day is simply because of one of those crew members, a woman named Christa McAuliffe. She was a school teacher, and with this mission she was going to become the first school teacher to go into space.

The excitement of the launch we shared that day was quickly followed with confusion and fear as seventy-three seconds into flight the shuttle exploded, killing all seven crew members instantly. And of course, in the weeks to follow, everyone wanted an answer to the question, "How did this happen?" After all, we don't simply move on from such catastrophes. We investigate them so that we might make sure this never happens again. In 1986 this took the form of the Rogers Commission, appointed by President Reagan, who ultimately identified the issue as some faulty O-rings that were unable to function properly in temperatures below fifty degrees (it was thirty-six degrees on the morning of the launch).¹

This inclination within ourselves to want answers when catastrophes happen is as logical as it is universal. But it shouldn't apply only to those things that might threaten the physical safety of ourselves or another. This inclination should also creep up in our hearts when we witness a person or group of people walk into spiritual ruin. That, after all, is much more serious than even our physical well-being. So when we read the Old Testament and notice the Israelites—who had witnessed deliverance from Egypt, miracles like passing through the sea and being fed with manna, and even the conquest of a number of Canaanite armies under the Lord's power—walk into idolatry and rebellion and face the Lord's judgment and be driven out of the land that the Lord had given them, the question should arise within our hearts, "What went wrong?" After all, it would seem that their reasons for walking in faith and faithfulness before the Lord would have been numerous.

And asking that question about Israel's turn to idolatry and rebellion isn't simply one to satisfy our curiosity. It's a question we should ask in terms of our own self-interest. We do not want to walk down the road that they traveled. In fact, speaking of Israel's judgment before the Lord, Paul can say that "these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor 10:6). And so I want to raise the question this morning, "What then went wrong

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Shuttle_Challenger_disaster#Investigation. Accessed on September 15, 2020.

with Israel that led them to being expelled from the land that the Lord had given them as an inheritance?”

One key place to answer that question is the book of Judges—which we will look at over the next three weeks. You could sum up the purpose of the book of Judges by saying that it demonstrates for us the “Canaanization”² of Israel, after they were to drive the Canaanites out of the land and dwell there. In other words, instead of driving out the Canaanites from the land in full so that they might be a light to the world of a people wholly dedicated to the Lord, Israel ended up being Canaanized, taking on the thoughts and ways of the unbelieving Canaanites until their lives were characterized by idolatry and rebellion against the Lord. No doubt, then, the author of this book recorded this path of Israel into idolatry and rebellion so that his own generation of readers might not imitate the evil seen here. But we should not see this benefit of this book as lying only with the generation of readers who would have originally read this narrative. Rather, at any point in the church’s existence, with the pressing threat of the culture around us pushing us to be conformed to this world, we need a reminder not to repeat the evil of the past, not to go down the road that we see with ancient Israel in the book of Judges. And so we turn to this seventh book of the OT.

Before we look at the first section of the book, let me give you an overview of the book and this sermon series. The book of Judges can be divided into three sections. In 1:1-3:6, you get a look at the context and background that led to Israel’s turning from the Lord. Then in 3:7-16:31—the main section of the book—you see six cycles of Israel walking through turning from the Lord, being judged, crying out for mercy, and being delivered. These deliverances come at the hand of judges whom the Lord raises up to save his people, and it is from them that the book derives its name. But these six cycles that each begin with rebellion do not merely repeat what came before, but they illustrate a downward spiral. In other words, they show Israel’s descent into greater idolatry and rebellion. And finally, in 17:1-21:25, we see Israel’s rebellion reach a climax as we see an illustration of just how deep their perversion has gone, and it is a painful scene to look at.

And I want to approach this book at high-altitude, looking at it simply in these three sections. There is no doubt much benefit in getting down into the weeds a little more closely with biblical books. We’ll do that with the book of Philippians soon as we’ll take thirteen messages merely to cover four chapters, and I did that in 2004 with the book of Judges itself, covering this book in nine messages (which you can listen to online).³ But there is also a benefit to looking at the big picture of a book, which is more easily done with a high-altitude approach like we’ll take these three weeks.

² Daniel Block summarizes the book of Judges as showing the “Canaanization of Israelite society during the period of the settlement,” *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1999), 58.

³ <https://cccjackson.org/sermons?book=Judges&page=1&type=bible>. You’ll have to go to page 2 in order to see the first message in that series.

Judges begins after the death of Joshua. Those are the first words of the book—“After the death of Joshua.” But you’ll find in 2:5 that the author takes us back briefly to the last days of Joshua and repeats the narrative of his death there. This is because chapter 1 gives us a historical report of what happens as Israel begins to settle into the land into which Joshua led them, and 2:1-3:6 gives us a theological interpretation of why these things happened. One commentator has suggested that the author moves from chapter 1 to chapter 2 like a preacher moves from reading the text to expositing the text except this is a move from reporting history to interpreting history. But specifically in this first section we get to see the background for why everything ended up going so badly for Israel in the promised land and what led to their outright rebellion against the Lord. So what do we see in this opening chapter that shows how Israel wound up immersed in outright idolatry and rebellion? First, they compromised in obedience to God’s commands.

They compromised in obedience to God’s commands

The book of Judges starts out so well. In the opening verse we are told that the people asked the Lord who should go up and fight the Canaanites, the Lord identified Judah, and “Judah went up and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand” (1:4). And this is the formula that we’d seen at points in the book of Joshua. The Lord had made everything quite clear, saying to them in Deuteronomy 7, saying, “When the LORD brings you into the land . . . and clears away many nations before you . . . and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them . . . for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods” (Deut 7:1-4).

The idea of completely eliminating the people in the land is that if they didn’t and allowed the people to remain, they’d be tempted to intermarry with them and eventually serve their gods. But the great thing was, Israel didn’t have to worry about the fight. The issue wasn’t about their military strength. God was going to hand over their enemies as they sought to obey him. So would they?

Well, right out of the gate Judah compromises. We read that they “could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron” (1:19). And here we might seize on *could* not. Maybe they just weren’t able. But, again, the issue was never about ability. In fact, in an earlier time in Joshua 17:18, Joshua had made clear to the Israelites, “You shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong.” Moreover, when we get to chapter 2 the Lord will make clear why he wasn’t giving the enemy into their hands. But their compromised obedience just gets worse from here. In 1:21, we read that the people of Benjamin didn’t drive out the Jebusites but let them settle with them. We read that the tribe of Joseph basically made a covenant with a family in Luz who rebuilt the city and dwelt there as a Canaanite presence all their days. And then in verses 27-33 it almost becomes bothersome to read the repetition of the phrase, they “did not drive out the inhabitants,” even though they had the strength to do so. They simply decided to subject the peoples to forced labor.

Now, as I mentioned, chapter 1 simply gives this to us as a military report. We're told what happened. As chapter 2 begins we're told why. We're told that the angel of the LORD appeared to the people and said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you" (2:1-3).

What we're seeing unfold in this early section of Judges is that Israel was being disobedient to the Lord's commands, and the Lord was not driving out their enemies as he promised if they disobeyed. We might say that they were *kind of* obeying him. They were going to war like he said. They even seemed to reduce their enemies to nothing by subjecting them to forced labor. But that's not what the Lord commanded them to do. He commanded them to devote their enemies to destruction and make no covenant with them. What we're seeing here in the opening section of Judges is compromised obedience. And compromised obedience is just another way of saying "disobedience."

This is what you and I must guard against in our own lives. The Lord doesn't give us commands in order that we might try to weigh what he's said and reason if there's a better way. I think we see this clearly if we think about our children. Imagine that I'd said to my children when they were young, "Do not play in the street." Then I come home and seeing them playing in the street. I would obviously be upset. But would it change anything at all if one of them said, "But I figured it was no big deal if we didn't see any cars in the street. After all, surely you just wanted our safety, and we're safe in the street if there aren't cars"? Of course that wouldn't make me less upset, would it? I would say to my kid, "Your job is not to reason out what you think is best. Your job is to obey what I tell you to do." And I just want to note that it's the same with us toward the Lord. Our job is not to try to be wiser than God. We just obey, and we obey everything he commands.

And let me note one more thing there for us. Demanding absolute obedience to God's commands isn't legalism. Legalism can be seen when we try to do good works to earn our salvation or when we establish commands where God issues no commands. But carefully obeying God's commands isn't legalism; it's just obedience. And that is part of the mission Christ has given us as a church to teach one another to obey the commands of Christ. But let me continue on before reflecting more on this because it's not just that we see Israel compromising obedience but we also see that their toleration of sin led to greater and more perverse sin.

Their toleration of sin led to greater and more perverse sin

By the time you get to the end of chapter 1 you might be tempted to say, "What's the big deal?" After all, they did kill most of the enemy armies and they even subjected to forced labor many who remained. That doesn't seem to be the most wicked of things, does it? But we see something interesting beginning in 2:6 and following. The author takes us back to Joshua's life, mentions that Joshua as long as Joshua lived, the people did okay, but then he died, and the next

generation began evil. Here's what we read in 2:11-13, "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. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth." Then, our text ends with these words in 3:5-6: "So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And their daughters took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods."

Do you see what is happening here? The Lord had told them to devote the Canaanites to complete destruction and not to make covenants with them and live among them. And the reason why is because if they compromised on that command, they would not only allow them to live among them but would intermarry with them and eventually serve their false gods. And that's exactly what happened. A small compromise in obedience only led to greater and more perverse sin.

Sin isn't static. It's not content to stay where it is. It comes with a hardening and deceiving ability so that when you sin and ignore it, your heart gets a little harder so that it's not as sensitive to the evil of the sin. Your mind gets a little deceived so that sin isn't as easily recognized as sin. And that's how someone moves to doing something that they once would have seen as repulsive. Tolerated sin inevitably leads to greater and more perverse sin. So, it may well be that not everyone who lusts eventually commits adultery, but I promise you that everyone who commits adultery first began by tolerating and not making war against lustful thoughts and actions. All those who intellectually turn away from and deny the faith first began by stopping a practice of meditating on God's Word and renewing their minds to what it says. Sin always wants to pull us to more and greater sin, and that's why sin can never be tolerated but must be immediately repented of and dealt with.

And we even see this progression happen generationally with Israel. In 2:16-23 the author describes for us the cycle that we're going to see described throughout the rest of the book. These verses are a summary of what is to come. And the cycle is basically that the people would sin, God would then hand them over to their enemies, the people would cry out to God, God would raise up a judge and deliver them, but then the people would go right back to sin and begin the cycle again when the judge died. That's what the last half of chapter 2 describes. But I want to point your attention to one verse that stands out in describing this cycle. It's describing the last stage of the cycle where right after the judge dies, the people go right back to sinning and begin the cycle afresh. It's 2:19. Here's what it says, "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."

In other words, it's not just that the next generation repeated the sins of their fathers. They did all those, but they also added sins and were "more corrupt" the text says. That is a reminder to us as parents that if we tolerate sins in our own lives, we may be setting up our children not only

to see those sins as acceptable but the hardening and deceiving effect of that may lead them to pursue greater and more perverse sins. In other words, let's not think of our sins as a private matter but realize that they can affect those we love most.

When the book of Judges ends, it ends with a horrid picture. It is almost too painful to read, and if you read ahead you'll see what I mean. But if we ask the question, "How did things get to this point?" the answer begins right here. They compromised God's commands and pursued obedience with exceptions. But because sin isn't content to stay there, their toleration of sin only led to greater and more perverse sin in their own lives. And not only that but their children saw these things tolerated and began on an even more corrupt note than their parents. This pattern would eventually lead to their expulsion from the land.

Let that not be us. These things were written down, Paul says, as an example for us so that we might not desire evil as they did. So, I want to encourage you, as believers, to make sure you're not tolerating sin but confess it and repent of it this morning. Let this be a day that we search our hearts, turn from sin, and delight in the Lord's forgiving and transforming grace. And if you're an unbeliever this morning, I want to assure you that your answer isn't just to try to do better. There's an interesting note in chapters 2 and 3 of our text. Twice the Lord says that not driving out the Canaanites would test them. We read in 2:21-22, the Lord saying, "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." Then again in 3:4, "They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses."

Now, we might say, "But the Lord already knew that they wouldn't obey, so what is the purpose of this test?" But the revealing of their sinful hearts wasn't for the Lord to find out what they would do. He knew what they would do. It was to show *them* their wicked, sinful hearts. And the reason this is needed is because it's only when we see how sinful our sins are and how helpless we are to change them that we will begin to see our need for Jesus. God sent his Son precisely because we couldn't save ourselves but needed one to obey for us, pay the penalty for our sins on the cross, and rise from the dead for us. We are saved by faith in him. But it is only when we give up on looking to ourselves that we will look to him in faith. That's what the Lord was showing Israel. So, today, would you give up on looking to yourself and turn to Christ in repentance and faith. Turn to him. And for those who have, let's give thanks for Christ as we come to the table. Amen.