

The Book of Judges

Lesson 2 - Chapter 1

We set the stage for exploring Judges last week and we'll move into the 1st chapter today. What we're going to see is a rapid slide of Israel from a pinnacle of success and accomplishment and (more importantly) harmony with God into an every man for himself attitude. When I say rapid I'm speaking of a period of probably only 10-15 years after Joshua passed before the 12 tribes began losing their way.

We need to digest an interesting reality of Israel's history that is one of those little factoids that can give us a better perspective of what life was like for them and it helps us to understand what was underlying Israel's history especially between the times of Joshua and King Josiah (who ruled over Judah from 640 –609 B.C.). It was that exceedingly few copies of the Torah were created, and they certainly did not wind up in the hands of any ordinary citizen. In fact it appears that by the time of King David (around 300-400 years after Joshua's death), the Torah was all but lost and well on its way to being forgotten.

Once the tribes dispersed in earnest around Canaan and started to take firmer hold in the allotted territories, the Priesthood struggled to exist (let alone have any significant influence). The roles of the Priests and the Levite Tabernacle workers blurred. Only a few of the 48 cities that the Levites were promised within the tribal territories were ever actually handed over, and the funding they were to receive from those same tribes to maintain themselves and those cities rarely sufficed.

The Tabernacle (at the time of chapter 1 in Judges) resided in Shiloh, but it would steadily go into disrepair over the decades. By King David's day it was moved to Gibeon. Tents by definition are temporary and wear out rather quickly as compared to stone huts. While we might ask ourselves how much it could possibly cost to maintain a tent, we must remember the elaborate nature of this one, the super expensive materials used, and the number of exceptional craftsmen required to make it originally. All one has to do to get an understanding of this sad progression is to go to England and witness the disheveled condition of many grand churches and cathedrals as a result of a dying Christianity that first lost interest and then lost their faith.

Thus when King David asked Yehoveh if he could build a Temple to the Lord (and his son Solomon finally did) it was not actually to replace the Wilderness Tabernacle per se for the ancient one had long since been abandoned due to it wearing out and apparently no desire to repair it; rather it was that there was no properly built sanctuary under the Mt. Sinai specifications. David apparently built some type of tent to house the Ark (and I'm sure it was far more than some Bedouin looking affair), but David also took it upon himself to appoint Levites and priests to certain duties, so we can assume that the order of service and careful

attention to detail was not at all Kosher anymore. And very likely there were but a few among a remnant of priests who even remembered just how to properly observe the rituals and procedures.

We get some idea of how inconsequential and impotent the priesthood had become when we look at the story of the Ark being brought from Beit Shemesh to King David at his request, and it was placed unceremoniously in an Ox Cart to transport it (a king-sized no-no). Then a man touched the Ark (another no-no) and died from it, which (when David heard about it) caused David to get paranoid so he changed his mind about having the Ark near him and he asked a Levite (NOT a cohen, a priest) named Obed-edom to keep the Ark in his home (another serious infraction). Yet, for reasons we won't get into today, we are told that the Lord greatly blessed Obed-edom's household as a result of the Ark residing there, so David decided it was not only safe but also advantageous to him (personally) to possess the Ark, so he called for it to be brought to Jerusalem and there he prepared a tent to house it.

We see from all this that the priesthood simply took orders, that it was barely functioning (if at all), and that even the most basic of all rules that no one could ever look upon the Ark of the Covenant and to touch it meant instant death had been lost to history.

Thus we will find that a phrase repeated a number of times in the book of Judges, Shofetim (Shophetim) in Hebrew, is: "In those days there was no king and every man did what was right in his own eyes." And if one could sum up the book of Judges it would be the thought reflected in that brief but powerful statement.

Let's read Judges chapter 1.

READ JUDGES CHAPTER 1 all

There is an important purpose to the book of Judges that is almost universally missed; and it is that God was demonstrating the NEED for a king over Israel. Many, including myself not so long ago, have kind of reflexively said that with Samuel's anointing of King Saul the Lord gave to Israel something that He did NOT want to give them, a king. But an honest reading of Judges shows us something different.

In reality the Lord was teaching Israel that they could not function without a king. They could not follow God's laws and commands without a king. Joshua wasn't officially a king, but in many ways that was his role; he was Yehoveh's definition of a king that is diametrically opposed to man's definition of a king. Joshua was the example of ideal leadership for Israel, one they failed to follow. One that won't come again until Messiah returns.

Man's definition of a king is as privileged royalty who is served by his subjects who usually have no choice in the matter. God's definition of a king is as a shepherd who is a kind of servant to those who have chosen to follow him by their own free will. Man's kings used human shields consisting of thousands of men who would lay down their lives for the benefit of the king. God's king would lay down his life for the benefit of the people. The problem with

Israel was that eventually they wanted THEIR (and their neighbors') definition of a king to rule them, and so the Lord gave it to them. It was the **type** of king, not the idea of being ruled by a king that would be the issue.

Verse 1 says that after Joshua died the people asked Yehoveh an important question: who would be the first to again do battle with the Canaanites? This was no rhetorical question. During Joshua's day and for a brief period at the beginning of the rule of the various Shophetim "asking (or inquiring) of the Lord," meant that the Urim and Thummim were used to seek His will. Of course this could only have happened when the High Priest was still performing his official role and when the tribal leaders still recognized the High Priest's God-ordained purpose and position.

The answer the Lord gave through the two special stones was that Judah would be that tribe to resume battle to finish the conquest of Canaan. And this is a good time for me to remind you that indeed all of Canaan had not been conquered as we begin Judges; that it was the duty of each of the 12 tribes (the exception being the tribe of Levi who was not counted as among the 12) to finish driving the Canaanites out of their allotted territory. It was this understanding that had caused Joshua such great anguish and frustration because for a long time 7 of the tribes REFUSED to accept their territories because it meant the hard and dangerous job of battling the various Canaanites fell to them.

This by no means meant that the leaders of the tribe of Judah was appointed (at this time) to take over for Joshua. However, as we'll soon see, Judah would play a special and somewhat self-sacrificing role among his brother tribes. The first thing Judah did was to go to Simeon (the tribe not the person) and ask them to fight alongside of them. There was a good and logical reason for this; as verse 3 says, Simeon and Judah were brothers. Leah was their mother so they were FULL brothers and as we're learning in the Torah and later books, it was the MOST usual for a man to have multiple wives and concubines, and so only sometimes were brothers and sisters full brothers and sisters. As often as not they were what we today call step brothers and sisters.

Therefore Judah and Simeon essentially signed up for mutual assistance and it was natural they would. Further, Simeon's territory would be more or less carved out of the center of Judah's. Such an arrangement would have been practically unthinkable if not for the close family relationship. Even so, in only few more generations the tribe of Judah would largely absorb the tribe of Simeon. And by the time of King Solomon, Simeon no longer had its own territory and although some retained a memory of their Simeonite tribal identity most did not.

In verse 4 we find the coalition forces of Judah and Simeon waging battle against the Canaanites and the Perizzites. At this point in history the term Canaanites referred in a non-specific way to all the various tribes and peoples who lived in the Land of Canaan even if they technically were not from the line of Canaan. Perizzites are thought by many scholars not to be a specific tribe, but rather it refers to a conglomerate of villages that inhabited the hill country.

This encounter was against a fellow called Adoni-Bezek. Adoni-Bezek is not a person's name; it is a title that means Lord of Bezek. Bezek was probably the family name of a long

established dynasty. So when authority was passed from one ruler to the next, each successive ruler would have been called Adoni-Bezek. It's like saying, "King of England", with the obvious question being, "which one?" Therefore we no more know the actual name of this individual than we know where the place of Bezek was actually located.

As the battle ensued, Judah and Simeon were winning so the Lord of Bezek fled (as was usual for a king). They found him, caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes but didn't kill him. He was really rather philosophical about this unpleasant turn of events, as he says that he treated 70 enemy kings in exactly the same way, so God just returned the favor. Really this is a statement of *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, that was generally understood and practiced among all Middle Eastern cultures. Don't think (by the way) that the use of the term "God" is referring directly to the Israelite God, YHWH. The Hebrew word used is *elohim*, and that was the generic term used for any god. Adoni-Bezek was merely saying that his god, or some god, was repaying his lack of mercy with retribution.

Further 70 is not a number that we're to take literally. 70 means a great but unspecified number in this context.

Why cut off the thumbs and big toes of this Lord? Because by doing so such a man became impotent in battle. Without thumbs he could not hold a sword, he could not shoot a bow, he couldn't be effective in hand-to-hand combat or even drive a chariot. Without his big toes he lost any real mobility. He could walk with care but he couldn't run. Therefore he couldn't flee from danger. So even if this captured king eventually escaped from Judah, his lack of thumbs and big toes meant his days of leadership were over. That he died in Jerusalem is referring to natural causes; he wasn't executed (at least that was anywhere recorded).

Next in verse 8 we find Judah and Simeon fighting against Yerushalayim and capturing it from the Jebusites. We're told that the city was burned (a common practice) and actually this was only keeping in line with the Law of Herem, the law of the ban, whereby since this was Holy War the spoils belonged to God. And the only way to give God a city was to send it up to him in smoke by burning it. Unfortunately Israel would only hold on to Yerushalayim for a short time.

Jerusalem was not in either Judah's or Simeon's territory, but rather Benjamin's. So what we find later in verse 21 is that after its capture it was quickly turned over to Benjamin. But Benjamin either had little interest in holding it or was just incapable and lost it back to the Jebusites until the time of David. What tended to happen at this point in history was that an Israeli tribe would capture a Canaanite city but would often allow the inhabitants to stay as subjects and serfs that would pay tribute (taxes) to the victorious Hebrews. It didn't always work out so well, and Jerusalem was one of those instances. Judah and Simeon fought for it and took it; they (properly) gave it to Benjamin, and Benjamin allowed the Jebusites to remain. Thus the few Benjamites who did settle in Jerusalem soon found themselves in the minority to a more dominant Jebusite king. This story would be repeated *ad infinitum* in the Land of Canaan.

Something we need to plant firmly in our memories for future reference is this expanding contrast between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Here we find Judah in victory after victory,

and we are told that the reason for their success was that the Lord was with them. On the other hand is Benjamin whose lot is failure. Judah wins Yerushalayim, Benjamin loses it. King Saul, 1st king of Israel, was of the tribe of Benjamin (and we're all aware of his tragic character and failures), the 2nd king was David of the tribe of Judah and we're equally aware of his close-to-God's-heart character and stunning victories.

Next Judah and Simeon attack Hebron that was also known as Kiryat-Arba. Double, even triple, names were typical in that day as they reflected the changing of hands of cities to various nations who spoke various languages. Kiryat-Arba means "city of four", referring to a confederation of 4 city-states who allied for mutual protection and economic gain. Hebron means "confederacy" or "association", which is essentially the same idea as Kiryat-Arba. Sheshai, Achiman, and Talmai were the lords over 3 of the city-states that formed this confederacy, and they were all sons of Anak. They were Anakim, that race of large men who produced the giant Goliath.

After that Judah and Simeon made war upon Debir, also known as Kiryat-Sefer. Kiryat-Sefer means city of the book. But there were a number of Kiryat-Sefers because it was more a description than a name. Sefer not only means "book", but "records"...like birth records and accounting records. Once a region or a confederacy got large enough they would designate one city as the common place where important records for their society were kept and so it garnered the title of Kiryat-Sefer, the City of Records.

The next several verses retell a story told in Joshua 15 about the a clan leader of Judah named Caleb (the same person who was one of 12 spies who scouted out Canaan for Moses and came back with a good report). Caleb assigned the task of taking Debir to Othniel the son of Kenaz. It is pretty interesting to understand that Caleb (and Othniel, a close family member) actually came from Edomite heritage (Edomites were descended from Esau). Somehow Caleb's ancestors became part of the tribe of Judah and even became the most powerful clan within Judah. This is something we should not easily forget because it demonstrates just how early the Israelite people became a diverse and genealogically mixed nation. In return for taking Debir Caleb gave his daughter Achsah to Othniel, who probably was her uncle. As part of her dowry she received land, and then later rights to water wells, which was a terribly important matter in an area of the Negev that had decent soil but precious little available water.

This interesting summary of history continues in verse 16 with a reference to Moses' father-in-law's clan of the Keini or Kenites (not to be confused with the Kennezeitites). The Kenites were a clan of the tribe of Midian (they lived where the mountain of the Burning Bush raised up out of the desert floor). Moses' wife's side of the family migrated under the protection of Judah and Simeon to an area called the City of Date Palms and settled there. There is no agreement on exactly where this is; usually this is thought to be Jericho, but others insist it is a little further south than Jericho.

Judah and Simeon continued in their victories by warring against Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron. Yes, that same Gaza we hear about on the news day and night. Those 3 cities are commonly said to be cities of the Philistines, but as of the time of the opening verses of the book of Judges the Philistines had not yet established themselves in those places, therefore it was

some of those various Canaanite peoples who inhabited them. Then we're told that while Judah was successful in taking more of the hill country away from other Canaanites, they were unable to drive them out of the valleys. And that was due to the use of iron chariots by the enemy. Simply put, chariots needed relatively flat ground to operate upon. They were near useless on steep hills or rocky places. Therefore the Canaanites couldn't use their most feared weapons platforms, chariots, in the hills and thus lost their advantage to Judah. The area of the plains and valleys was another matter altogether, and the fearsome chariots enabled the Canaanites to hang on to the enormous fertile valleys.

Verse 22 changes venues and speaks for the first time in the book of Judges about "the house of Yosef (Joseph)". The house of Joseph technically consisted of the tribe of Manessah and the tribe of Ephraim. But often only in the Bible it is only Ephraim that is meant by "the house of Joseph", and at other times it's hard to tell if it's one or both that is meant. Probably here it means Ephraim because the happenings are either in or near their territory.

Let me again remind you that all this attacking we see on Israel's part was supposed to be happening. The Lord expected them to fight these battles. What He did NOT expect the 12 tribes to do was to make treaties with the enemy and find reasons to live peacefully with the people they conquered. The Lord's explicit instructions were to drive out or kill all the inhabitants of Canaan. The lone exceptions were those who dropped their allegiance to their nations and to their gods, and worshipped YHWH instead.

How can I bypass this without making note what is happening in Israel today? Sadly the current generations of Israelis are victims of an incomplete conquest from over 3000 years ago. And the problem then is as it is now: a refusal to believe God. The men of Joshua's day and forward wanted to insert their own sense of morality and mercy and purpose into the equation as though somehow their opinion was on equal footing with Yehoveh's commands. Once in the Land they considered their neighbors, saw that they looked and behaved very much as themselves, realized that probably among the Israelites were family ties between many of the inhabitants of Canaan and came to the conclusion that living WITH the Canaanites was a better, kinder, wiser, and perhaps more pragmatic approach that fighting them to the death with the only possible outcomes being driving these Canaanites out of their homes and their land or annihilating them outright. Let's face it, what would we do confronted with such a choice?

Well I think we have the answer to that rhetorical question if we're honest enough to face it. While at the same time the modern church glints their eyes and looks disapprovingly at the barbaric instructions of the Old Testament God of Israel towards the Canaanites, we tend to simultaneously criticize the Israelites for not fully carrying out those orders! Thus today, in the ongoing and yet-to-be-completed battle for Canaan that is the modern day situation Israel finds itself in, the majority of the church tends to side with the idea of cease fires, aid and even-handed treatment for Israel's Arab and Muslim enemies, understanding and sympathy when those same enemies demand another piece of Israel for their own, and the grand hope for a lasting treaty of peace and co-operation between Israel and their foes that each can live and let live.

We then point to our loving Messiah Yeshua and declare that the Old Testament God's aspirations and demands of a land rid of people who oppose Israel and oppose the God of Israel has been declared null and void. Tolerance for everyone and everything is the new aim and the New Testament God wants peace at almost any price. Israel is also caught up in the desire to see the end of war, so they continue in the ways of their ancestors and declare that their sense of humanitarianism and fairness trumps Yehoveh's commands concerning the conquest of the Promised Land. **This** is the cause for the intractable Middle Eastern problem; not oil, not Islam, not the UN or the EU. It is disobedience and disbelief not only among Jews but also among Christians that stalls the final resolution, not inadequate diplomacy or a lack of sincerity.

Let me warn all who are listening that to support the idea of Israel giving up land to their enemies is offensive to the Lord. Those who want Israel to accept a peace agreement that has Israel conceding rights to the Temple Mount to those who worship a false god, Allah, so that they can maintain a pagan worship site there are complicit in idolatry. Those Israelites who seek these things are denying the Covenant of Abraham and are saying that the Lord God is wrong and didn't mean what He said or is incapable of bringing it about.

But let me also say something that may surprise you: the Battle of Armageddon is but the final battle of the Holy War for Canaan that the leaders who followed Joshua, then David, Solomon, and now the elected government of Israel have all decided is not worth fighting. We Christians sing joyfully of the coming of Jesus and pray that today is that day, but somehow we cannot connect it that the same Messiah who suffered and died as a meek lamb for our sakes, will be leading this final battle for the conquest of Canaan. He will be as ruthless as Yehoveh expected Joshua and those who followed him to be (but who refused), and not one person who withholds their allegiance to the God of Israel and His Messiah will remain alive on the face of this planet when Yeshua finally lays down his sword of vengeance. The Conquest for the Land of Canaan isn't over, it's happening right before our eyes; the worst is yet to come. Even more its effect is expanding to include the entire earth.

It may turn out that as Yeshua's followers we will not be able to fully escape all of the consequences of this 3400 year long battle, but we can choose to be on the right side.

In verse 22 the tribe of the house of Yosef (probably only Ephraim) attacks the city of Beit-El that at one time was known as Luz. The city of Ai was very nearby, in fact Ai and Beit-El (if not sister cities) may well have been the same city just slightly relocated after a destruction. When Ephraim approached the city a man of Beit-El decided to co-operate with some Ephraimite spies and show them a good way to steal into the city. In return the Ephraimite spies promised to let the man and all of his family survive the coming onslaught. This has tones of the Jericho attack and Rahab the prostitute/innkeeper from the early parts of the book of Joshua, but that's where all similarity between the two stories ends. This man of Beit-El expressed no interest in Israel's God, and his only motive was self-preservation to the point that he was willing to commit treason to save his own skin. There was no honor in what happened here as there was when Rahab had converted before she met the spies and her allegiance to the God of Israel was at the heart of her decision. We get an interesting and instructional footnote in the next verse that says that this man of Beit-El went into the country of the Hittites (modern day

Turkey) and there built a city and called it Luz. In other words after he turned his own home city over to destruction at the hands of Israel, he went and led the construction of a new city and he gave it the same name as his former one. Guilt? Probably.

From here to the end of chapter one we get mostly a list of failed attempts by various Israelite tribes to drive out various groups of Canaanites from their territories. Basically this is setting the playing field for what we will see happen in a chapter or so in Judges.

Manessah, the other house of Joseph, could not drive the Canaanites out of Bet Shean and the surrounding areas. Many of you have been to Bet Shean and the extensive Roman ruins there. Neither could they terminate the Canaanites' hold on Megiddo, a very important fortress on a major trade route crossroads as well as a place that overlooks an extensive portion of the Jezreel Valley. We're told that in time Israel was able to subdue them sufficiently to use them as forced labor; but here we again see how the new Israeli mindset had taken hold. For this generation of Israelites the issue was expediency and economics and God's purposes lost out to these weak and selfish desires.

Ephraim failed at Gezer.

Zevulun followed their brothers' ways and allowed the enemy to remain but used them to an economic advantage.

Asher followed suit in their territory.

Naftali made peace and lived intertwined with Canaanites in some of their territory, but was able to subdue them in other parts.

The last couple of verses set the stage for the migration of Dan away from their territory that was contiguous with Judah's (to the west of Judah). Dan not only couldn't defeat the people in their territory, the Amorites who lived there ran Dan out into the hills. We find that Dan eventually moved north to the border of Lebanon. Judah soon annexed Dan's former territory and they were able to defeat the Amorites; though again Judah elected to use the Amorites as forced labor rather than to follow God's instructions to rid the land entirely of them.

In the end we can say this about the state of the 12 tribes as a result of all of that we have discussed today:

1. Israel simply couldn't drive the Canaanites out. So the Canaanites dug in and Israel's mindset moved from conqueror to diplomat. From sole possessor of the land to cohabitation with those who God found unacceptable to Him.
2. Israel found their freedom of movement highly impeded because their holds on the territories were spotty.
3. Even more problematic in the long run was that the wickedness of the Canaanites' worship of false gods remained intact and therefore represented an acute danger to Israel's purity and holiness, and a daily temptation to dilute their devotion to YHWH.
4. Israel decided it was better to create and maintain good relationships than to eject the

Canaanites from the land. In fact they saw that in many ways the Canaanites they were able to subdue made a ready and usable labor force so to them it made no sense to send them away.

I will conclude today with this short comment: the peace that men construct is not the peace that God instructs. For men peace is invariably the result of one of two things: war or compromise. In war (at least until our era) one side won, the other lost, and one subjugated the other and forced the subjugated to comply. Now more than ever it is a compromise type of peace that men seek. That is NOT the type of peace that Yehoveh is speaking of in His Word. His peace is absolute, it does not involve compromise and it comes from men's free will choice to serve the Lord as He demands to be served, and nothing else.

Israel saw nothing wrong in their approach to settling Canaan. Israel saw nothing wrong in their approach to battle, their new goal being making peace with their neighbors. So they participated in their neighbors' festivals and customs, gave respect to their former enemies' beliefs and even to their false gods, and as a result enjoyed a measure of rest and fruitfulness that was mostly manmade, and thus bore little resemblance to what Godly rest and fruitfulness looked like. Inter-marriage between Canaanites and Hebrews became an everyday affair with little resistance or thought, and most and both sides saw it as a good thing. Israel was blind to their condition and would not accept that they had broken faith with their God because they felt so good about themselves and their ability to contrive their own morality WITHOUT the direction of the Lord.

We'll see how the Lord feels about this in our next lesson.