

Judges

Chapter 1

A Great Start

21.01.2007

Today we start a series looking at the book of Judges.

At the start of the Book of Judges, Joshua was dead. The people of Israel had his words ringing in their ears, but not his presence to urge them forward. What would they do?

The fact is that they did very well, at least initially. Reading the start of Judges 1, after Joshua died, the people went straight to God in prayer and asked him what to do. And because they did this, it speaks volumes of the quality of Joshua's leadership. For he had been the Lord's servant. He never filled their vision so completely that he obscured their vision of God. And they Israelites knew that it was not Joshua who toppled the walls of Jericho, or who made the sun stand still over Aijalon.

They knew God was faithful and kept his promises. God was the greatest leader. So when Joshua died, they went to God confident that their future was secure in his hand.

And so they asked who would go first. He told them that Judah would, and that he had given the land to them.

With that assurance and that direction, they went on. The rest of the chapter tells us how they got on.

First of all, we are told of the exploits of the southern tribes in verses 4-21. Then we are told of the northern tribes in verses 22-36. Significant victories are won in the south and north.

In the south, in verse 8, they win Jerusalem. In verse 10, they win in Hebron. Then they have another victory in the south and west in verses 11-15.

In this, we are introduced to the great warrior Othniel, who will emerge in chapter 3.

He distinguishes himself in battle, and wins the very strong minded daughter of Caleb as his wife.

But then come the first disturbing admissions that all is not going so well. In verse 19 we are told that Judah was not able to get possession of the plain, and in verse 21 the Jebusites remain entrenched in Jerusalem.

Going then to the Northern tribes, they also began with a notable success at Bethel in verses 22-26, and a rip-roaring story it is, very brief, but it has spies and secret entrances and all the rest. It resonates with

Jericho's battle, and it was a very significant victory.

But then follows a long catalogue of deteriorating failures.

In verses 25-26, the Canaanites survive on the fringe of the settlement.

In verses 27-30, the Canaanites live among the Israelites.

In verses 31-33, the Israelites live among the Canaanites.

Then in verses 34, the Canaanites repulse the Israelites.

By the end of the chapter, you get the distinct impression that the conquerors are running out of puff. What started out so well is coming to an embarrassing and sticky end.

But the chapter tells it very sympathetically. Explanations are given.

[First] The Canaanites of the plain had superior weapons. Verse 19 says they had iron chariots. Iron smelting was the new technology and iron chariots were the new generation weapons. If you had iron chariots, you had superior tactical advantages on the coastal plains.

[Second] The Canaanites of the Jezreel valley were very determined. Verse 27 says they had a line of fortified cities stretching from Mt Carmel across to the Jordan. Locked in these cities, they doggedly resisted any attacks.

[Third] Although not having sole occupancy, at least the Israelites had slave labour to utilize. Four times in verses 27-36 we are told that when Israel became strong, she put the Canaanites to forced labour.

So in short, the writer seems to be saying that given the harsh realities that confronted them, they did rather well. At least they did as well as what could be expected in the circumstances.

And that is how we tend to sum up our Christian lives and church's growth don't we? We look and see unique victories and remember them fondly, and then look at the circumstances and see slow advances and set backs, but under the circumstances, well, at least we tried hard! We made a good show of it! We gave it our best shot! It's hard living here and doing these things!

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Hmmm...

For the Israelites continuing to conquer the land, it is a bit suspect isn't it? For if the Lord was really with them, how could failure be justified in terms of iron chariots, fortified cities and Canaanite pluck? Had the Lord not given them the land to conquer? Did he not promise victory?

At the end of Judges chapter 1, we are left with some questions. And we find the answer in the start of chapter 2. A key word links the 2 chapters. It is translated in English as "to go up". It is found 6 times in chapter 1, then at the start of chapter 2, then is not used again until chapter 4. It means to attack.

In 1:1 they ask *Who shall go up first for us?*

1:2 God replies *Judah shall go up.*

1:3 The men of Judah say *come up with me*

1:4 says *Then Judah went up*

1:16 The Kennizites went up with the men of Judah.

1:22 *The house of Judah also went up*

But in 2:1 we're told *Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim...*

When the angel of the Lord went up, the moment of truth came. All of their goings were reviewed from a different perspective.

Mankind's achievements look OK from one perspective, but when looked at from a heavenly perspective, it takes a different hue.

Suddenly none of the excuses about iron chariots, fortified cities, or trying hard washed anymore.

The angel said *I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I promised to your ancestors. I said 'I will never break my covenant with you. For your part do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.'* *But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done!*

Their work did not have the blessing or power of God on it because they had been unfaithful. Even in the territory which they had taken, they had left Canaanite altars standing. They had opened the door ever so slightly to things God had forbidden. They had begun to entertain things which were against the covenant, and God withheld his power and blessings.

Next week, we will see that the history is rewound and viewed from God's perspective, showing the spiritual failure underneath the military failure.

But by the end of 2:5, we are left with the people of Israel weeping before the Lord.

Jesus tells us that we too will one day have to account for how we have lived before the Lord. If we look at ourselves, we can see good reasons why things have not gone the way they should have. That temptation was too strong. God did not supply enough of this. Our family may have caused us major troubles so we could not do this or that. Our society is so wicked and materialistic that missionaries from overseas go home shaking their heads at the hardness of heart and difficulty of converting the people of Sydney.

But in the end, those excuses do not wash. They just do not wash.

Each one of us keeps sinning. Many have begun well, and ended badly, as Israel did here. Saul did. Solomon did. And the list goes on.

But not all finished badly. Joshua did not, he finished well. And Jesus did not, he finished well. And because he was faithful to the very end, even to death on the cross, He has won the victory for us. Our commission is not to go into the land to fight and kill and possess. Ours is to go into all the world, to be witnesses for Jesus, loving God and loving people.

As we do this, forgiven and upheld by him, we will rejoice with many many others on that last day, as John says in 1 John 2:28 *And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.*

How will it be with you and me? Will we persevere to the end? Or will we begin well and end badly? Be faithful to our Lord.